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Unruly Mountains: Competing Visions For China's Inner Asian Highland, 1368-1600

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Abstract

This dissertation uses the analytical tool of "competing visions" to examine the historical development of China's Inner Asian highland from 1368 to 1600. Straddling the Chinese heartland, Tibetan plateau, and the Mongol steppe, the highland region was a convergence zone that facilitated a constant flow of people, goods, and knowledge. Competing visions over the highland, as both historical phenomena and research perspective, highlight the dynamic nature of the region and its function as a bridge for cross-cultural encounters and transregional geopolitical interactions. By investigating how and why different social groups understood the highland differently, this dissertation scrutinizes the operating mechanism of a borderland society and its role in macroregional geopolitics. Focusing on material exchanges, knowledge circulations, border-crossings, and contestations over territoriality through the lens of Ming emperors, highland regime lords, Tibetan Buddhist monks, Ming military deserters, and Mongol nomads, this dissertation highlights the formation of a borderland space as the outcome of constant compromise and negotiation. This dissertation argues that the conflict of ideas and agendas in the highland provided the driving force not only for the formation of its political-economic landscape, social structure, and human-environment relations, but also the transformation of the highland from a middle ground where multiple territorial perceptions co-existed into a demarcating frontier between Ming China and the Inner Asian world.

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UNRULY MOUNTAINS:

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Xiaobai Hu

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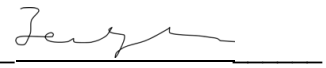

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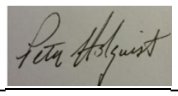

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Many people would agree that the pursuit of a Ph.D. is similar to taking a journey: there is tiredness, there are annoying surprises, there are doubts sometimes, but there is also beautiful scenery. Journeys are always full of memories, good and bad, but it is exactly such experiences that make the journey unforgettable. I still remember the first day of my journey, August 19th, 2015, when I landed at Newark Airport on a breezy afternoon. That was my first time traveling outside of Asia. But I was not a relaxed tourist taking a short vacation; instead, I was a nervous prospective Ph.D. student about to be challenged at one of the most prestigious universities in the world. I felt I was not ready for anything—a feeling that I have now for my future. But I have come to find that it is just this kind of uncertainty that makes a journey, be it academic or not, intriguing and appealing.

This dissertation would not have been feasible without the generous support, advice, honest critique, and friendship of many scholars, friends, and family members. First, from the bottom of my heart I would like to express my thanks for the members of my dissertation committee. I am deeply grateful for Prof. Siyen Fei's constant encourgement and tough love over the years. Prof. Fei's honest approach to learning and teaching—and life in general—will serve as an invaluable model to me for the rest of my career. Prof. Christopher Atwood familiarized me with the historiography of the Inner Asian world and has played the important but thankless role of devil's advocate by challenging me to refine my arguments and rethink my assumptions. Prof. Frederick Dickinson has always been generous with his time. He sets a high standard for what makes a good teacher and educator.

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation uses the analytical tool of "competing visions" to examine the historical development of China's Inner Asian highland from 1368 to 1600. Straddling the Chinese heartland, Tibetan plateau, and the Mongol steppe, the highland region was a convergence zone that facilitated a constant flow of people, goods, and knowledge. Competing visions over the highland, as both historical phenomena and research perspective, highlight the dynamic nature of the region and its function as a bridge for cross-cultural encounters and transregional geopolitical interactions. By investigating how and why different social groups understood the highland differently, this dissertation scrutinizes the operating mechanism of a borderland society and its role in macroregional geopolitics. Focusing on material exchanges, knowledge circulations, border-crossings, and contestations over territoriality through the lens of Ming emperors, highland regime lords, Tibetan Buddhist monks, Ming military deserters, and Mongol nomads, this dissertation highlights the formation of a borderland space as the outcome of constant compromise and negotiation. This dissertation argues that the conflict of ideas and agendas in the highland provided the driving force not only for the formation of its

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Chapter 1: Introduction

As its title suggests, the Collected Essays on the Statecraft of the August Ming (Ming jingshi wenbian 明經世文編) is an extensive corpus of political essays centering on statesmanship during the Ming dynasty. Compiled in the dynasty's final decade, the work serves as an important lens through which later readers and researchers developed a panoramic view of how various policies, economic development plans, and cultural and ideological trends were perceived and discussed by Ming authors. In short, the collection reveals how Ming state actors filtered and coded their attitudes toward their own times.

The Ming empire, similar to many other dynasties in Chinese history, faced territorial challenges from all directions. As one of the central issues of imperial politics, frontier defense is a primary concern of many works in Collected Essays on Statecraft of the August Ming. But in terms of which specific frontier region was most pressing for imperial security, different authors had their own opinions. Nonetheless, the summary of the collection's compilers could be treated as a fair comment with which many contemporaries as well as modern scholars would agree:

> Of the dangers created by the exotic barbarians, those from the northern barbarians (Beilu 北虜) are the most urgent; the next severe are the threats from the barbarians of Guangdong and Guangxi (Liangyue 兩粵), followed by the menace from the Yunnan and Sichuan barbarians (Dianshu 滇蜀) and the challenges posed by the barbaric Japanese dwarfs (Woyi 倭夷); what come at last are those westerly barbarians of Qiang (Xiqiang西羌).[1]

Many scholars of Ming China would agree with the late Ming intellectuals. The alleged northern barbarians were indeed the primary external threat for the regime;

[1] Song, *Fanli,* in Chen, *HuangMing Jingshi Wenbian*, 53.

although defeated by the Ming founder Zhu Yuanzhang, the Mongols had always been the greatest danger to Ming China.[2] Their successful capture of a Ming emperor was one of the most torturous humiliations, haunting the Ming intellectuals for centuries. Next were the so-called barbarians of Liangyue and Dianshu. These southern non-Han communities had largely maintained autonomy throughout the dynasty and constituted constant military and cultural pressures for the Ming.[3] During the Imjin war, the Japanese almost occupied and colonized Korea and thus considerably sabotaged the Ming-dominated East Asian world order.[4] What comes at last is the allegedly barbaric Xiqiang people, the protagonists of this dissertation.

Defining the Highland

The late Ming writings' references to the Xiqiang barbarians correspond to the indigenous non-Han communities living in modern-day eastern Qinghai, southern Gansu, and northwest Sichuan, a region this dissertation designates as the highland. Straddling the Chinese heartland, Mongol steppe, and Tibetan Plateau, the highland area was a topographical upland with high altitude, cold and dry climate, and half-agricultural, half-pastoral environment. Geographically speaking, it was the eastern end of the Hexi corridor, thus marking the gate to the Silk Road, and the northern part of the Chinese-Tibetan borderland that separated two cultural and political realms. From the geopolitical perspective, the highland region was the transitional zone that bridged the East and Inner Asian worlds (Fig. 1.1).

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[2] Dardess, *More than the Great Wall: The Northern Frontier and Ming National Security, 1368-1644*.
[3] Shin, *The Making of the Chinese State: Ethnicity and Expansion on the Ming Borderlands*; John Herman, *Amid the Clouds and Mist: China's Colonization of Guizhou, 1200-1700*.
[4] Swope, *A Dragon's Head and a Serpent's Tail*.

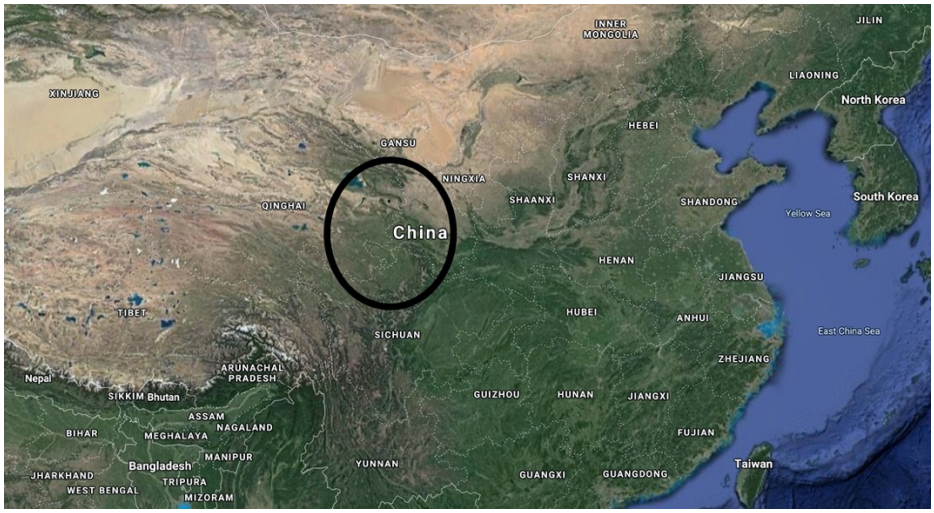

Fig. 1.1: Highland in East and Inner Asian worlds

My taking the highland as an analytical unit does not necessarily mean that this dissertation treats the region as a homogenous entity. None of the environmental and ecological criteria such as ruggedness, altitude, and remoteness are sufficient to define the region as a holistic geographical component. Quite the opposite, the region was—and still is—famous for its complicated topographical constitution and resultant diversity in its inhabitants' ethnicity, livelihood, and even biological species. Therefore, the concept of the highland here is primarily an artificial one.

But the highland designation for the region does not appear out of nowhere; rather, it emerges from the Ming people's perspective. First, the designation for the place and its inhabitants in Ming-produced texts are quite consistent. The area was called Fan Di (番地) in Ming sources, and the locals Fan Ren (番人) or Xifan (西番). Sometimes the Chinese character Qiang (羌) is also variously used to refer to either the people or the region, such as in the above-mentioned paragraph from Collected Essays on Statecraft of the August Ming. As later chapters will show, however, Qiang is most likely a romanticized designation for the so-called western barbarians, and the term of Fan is used with greater frequency throughout the Ming. Therefore, it was the Ming people who tended to treat the region as a whole and its inhabitants as

homogenous group. This understanding, from a contemporary academic and ethnographical point of view, is most likely biased and cannot accurately reflect the situation on the ground. But from the late 14th to the late 16th century, it was such an idea that primarily drove the Ming court's consistent economic, military, and religious policies exclusively applied to the region. This Ming perspective of the area is the historical root for this dissertation's definition of the highland.

The concept of the highland, by its own definition, is a term from the Ming's perspective. After all, it is only a 'high-land' when compared to the relatively low Chinese heartland. But this is not the only reason for me to adopt the term. Another imperative, perhaps more important in terms of historiography, is that the term "highland" implies a sense of distinctiveness. Mountainous regions in world history—no matter in the Mediterranean world, South American Andes, or southeast Asian Zomia area—have always been portrayed as realms of distinctive political economic and cultural traits. It is exactly this peculiarity of the mountain world that I would reveal. The highland world had its own social norms and political and cultural landscapes that in many ways were quite different from those of the lowland (i.e. Ming China). Therefore, employing the notion of the highland allows this dissertation to highlight such distinction and examine the history of the highland in its own light.

During the Ming dynasty, the highland region constituted the empire's northwest frontier. Compared with other frontier regions, the area was less of a military concern for the Ming. Although put under the close supervision of the Ming military, the Ming-designated Fan-Qiang (番羌) indigenes of the highland maintained a relatively peaceful relationship with the Ming. This was mainly due to two reasons. First, the highland indigenes had no vendetta against the Ming regime. They were not like the Mongols, whose relationship with the Ming was highly charged for historical and

political reasons. Second, resource competition between the highland indigenes and the Ming's Han subjects was less fierce. Unlike the empire's southern frontier region where the Ming's civilian migration mingled with the local non-Han groups and thus frequently fought with each other for scarce resources, the highland region was not a destination for the Ming's proactive civil migration. In contrast, throughout the duration of the dynasty, different highland regions were mostly the Ming's military administration units. Therefore, Ming people who dwelled in the highland were relatively disciplined able-bodied soldiers checked by the empire's passive military policy in the region.

Fig. 1.2: Highland as the Ming empire's northwestern frontier

If that is the case, one may wonder: Why would I focus on a seemingly less important frontier? A short answer to this question, I argue, is tied to how I understand the latest scholarly development of the fields of Ming history and Chinese frontier history. This dissertation downplays the decisive role of the state in Ming studies and conceptualizes the highland region not as an area under Ming China's iron-handed control, but as a contested zone in Chinese-Mongol-Tibetan geopolitics.

In this regard, the highland was a place where multiple political and religious forces constantly competed with each other, and their visions of the highland were at odds. It is exactly such diversity and dynamism on the highland that this dissertation addresses.

Positioning the Highland in Ming Studies

Like many other dynasties in Chinese history, by the end of its imperial evolution the Ming empire's sociopolitical engagement had extensively exceeded the dynastic founder's initial project. The tremendous changes that the Ming experienced over the arc of two and a half centuries have drawn considerable scholarly attention. A review of the extensive literature on Ming China suggests two major intellectual trends in the field: shifts from autocracy to state-society relations and center to frontier. In this dissertation, I argue that the decades-long debate on Ming dynasty state-society relations has the potential to inspire a revisit to Ming dynasty center-frontier interactions. The highlighted historical agency of Ming society allows me to challenge the central position of the state in current Ming frontier history, which overshadows to some extent the independence of frontier regions that oftentimes developed on their own terms.

The scholarly tendency to portray the early Ming as an autocratic state stemmed from the political concerns of the American academy in the 1970s, which sought to better understand the current despotic Chinese party-state through Chinese history. Political implications aside, I argue the research on early Ming autocracy served as the starting point for the long state-society debate to come. John Dardess's Confucianism and Autocracy is one of the foundational works of the field that provides an in-depth analysis of the early Ming empire's autocratic nature. In addition to Zhu Yuanzhang's imperial blueprint for Chinese society and his administration of

the bureaucratic system, Dardess pays specific attention to the early Ming Confucians, arguing that these intellectuals had formed an independent profession dedicated to ruling the state and thus contributed as much as Zhu himself to early Ming tyranny.[5] In contrast, Edward Farmer unpacks the ways that Zhu implemented power penetration into every capillaries of the imperial body. Focusing on Zhu's legislation specifically, Farmer reveals how the Ming founder programmed social regulation through a sophisticated legal system.[6] Because of these early studies, later scholars were primed to understand the Ming as an autocratic state.

Many of Zhu's choices built the framework in which the Ming regime matured. Relying on the Ming founder's policies for explanation thus became both a historical and historiographical phenomenon.[7] But in contrast with the path following early Ming inertia that took whatever the Ming founder perceived as the set rules, what we see in the late Ming is a completely different outlook featuring vibrant commerce, upside-down social hierarchy, and liberated values. These new changes are well-documented in Timothy Brook's Confusion of Pleasure, which provides a close examination of how commercial culture reshaped the social and political landscape of late Ming.[8] Along the same lines, Si-yen Fei's monograph on late Ming Nanjing provides an apt example to showcase the tension between early Ming utopia for a rural society and the late Ming reality of rapid urbanization.[9] Fei argues that cities, as an almost unremarked category in early Ming, played an important role as the dominant sphere of late Ming politics, economy, and culture. In a recent publication, Michael Szonyi aims to conclude the state-society debate by stating that the ongoing

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[5] Dardess, *Confucianism and Autocracy: Professional Elites in the Founding of the Ming Dynasty*.
[6] Farmer, *Zhu Yuanzhang and Early Ming Legislation: The Reordering of Chinese Society Following the Era of Mongol Rule*.
[7] One attempt to systematically examine Zhu Yuanzhang's influence on Ming dynasty as well as Chinese history is Schneewind, *Long Live the Emperor!: Uses of the Ming Founder across Six Centuries of East Asian History*.
[8] Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure: Commerce and Culture in Ming China*.
[9] Fei, *Negotiating Urban Space: Urbanization and Late Ming Nanjing*.

interaction between the state and the society should be understood not as "a story in which market displaces autocratic state," but rather as a process of negotiation in which the state-society relationship was constantly restructured.10 In other words, the agency of society as a historiographical intervention is already evident and needs no more stressing. A much more productive angle is to look at how such agencies changed our understanding of the Ming state.

Similar to the state-society binary, I argue that the center-frontier paradigm should be understood along the same lines. Previously, the notion of the "frontier" as a conceptual tool oftentimes marginalizes peripheral regions in the process of state formation. When a specific region is positioned as a "frontier," state expansion, ethnic unification, economic growth, and religious integration in that region are often cast as metropole-driven progress, which leaves little space for local agency and disguises the on-the-ground complexity. This stereotype may be recognized in a recent article by Chinese historical anthropologist, Du Shuhai, that discusses how south China, as a geographical frontier, was pulled into the imperial orbit. In total, the author categorizes five mechanisms through which the peripheral societies were brought into the imperial system, namely the imagination of common ancestries; construction of cultural landscapes; imposition of ideological discourse; mobilization of resources and population; and integration of worship rituals.11 In other words, the article identifies how the state gradually transformed many peripheral regions into part of China through different cultural and ideological means. Although the article admits that frontier social groups demonstrated the agency to proactively choose to cooperate with the center, usually for their own sake, the author suggests the inevitability of an overarching penetration of the frontier by the imperial center.

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[10] Szonyi, *The Art of Being Governed: Everyday Politics in Late Imperial China*, 228.
[11] Du, "Mingqing Yijiang Zhongguo Nanbu Bianjiang Diqu de Guojia Zhenghe Fangshi Yanjiu."

This paradigm, I argue, is teleological and gives the imperial center too much credit. The Ming court was nothing like a modern state, able to penetrate deep into the frontier region. Its impact on the distant periphery was intermittent at best. In other words, although nominally belonging to the Ming empire, many frontier societies were in fact autonomous and followed their own logics of historical development. While the imperial intervention indeed provided part of the driving force, the historical evolution of the frontiers was not necessarily directed by the center. This dissertation argues that the agency of the frontier, just like the society in the state-society binary, is self-evident. But unfortunately, it is still relatively understudied. Although scholars such as John Herman have persuasively foregrounded the historical trajectory of a frontier society on its own, scholarship that speaks to the agency of the frontier is still under-appreciated.12 This dissertation does not only highlight the imperative to understand frontier society in its own light; more importantly, it further explores how exactly portraying the highland as a frontier with agency could change our understanding of its history in relation to the so-called center. The answer to this question, to some extent, lies in how I position this dissertation within the historiography of Chinese frontier history.

Positioning the Highland in the Field of Chinese Frontier History

Roughly since the 1990s, Chinese frontier history has become a popular topic among historians of China. Even though the field was not new in the 90s, it received increased attention at this point due to the rise of the so-called New Qing History School. Previously, scholars understood frontiers in Chinese history in relation to imperial centers, as if the former were destined to be annexed by the latter. The process of cultural integration (i.e. "civilizing missions") accompanied the center's

[12] Herman, *Amid the Clouds and Mist: China's Colonization of Guizhou, 1200-1700*.

military expansion, which, according to Stephen Harrell, grants imperial centers the dominating role while categorizing peripheral people as subordinate.[13] The most representative variant of this "civilizing project" is the concept of "Sinicization" which served as the basic paradigm for Chinese frontier history for quite a long time.

Yet the New Qing History scholars harshly challenged this framework. Although quite diverse in their understanding of the Qing empire as a whole, the New Qing History scholars share one key value. They agree that the Manchus did not merely inherit the institutional legacy and political legitimacy from the Ming, as earlier generations of scholars had claimed, but also blended in certain Inner Asian characteristics in the process of empire-building and thus rendered the regime a multi-ethnic/cultural political entity. This re-conceptualization of the Qing empire stimulated scholars' interest in the history of these Inner-Asian frontier regions and thus extensively enriched the field of Chinese frontier history.

From the 90s to the first decade of the twenty-first century, scholars, primarily historians of Qing China, repositioned the frontiers in the imperial apparatus by revisiting the presupposed dominate-subordinate relationship between the imperial center and frontier. Recognizing the agency of frontier regions, historians further identified how the frontier history perspective could shed new light on the dynamics of China's imperial centers, and they addressed this question from different analytical angles such as ethnicity, environment, gender, and religion. Pamela Crossley highlights the constructivist nature of ethnic identity in Qing China's frontier regions. She proposes that both the Manchus and the Mongols went through the process of rephrasing origin legends and reclaiming genealogical lines and thus constructed a

[13] Harrell, ed., *Cultural Encounters on China's Ethnic Frontiers*, 3-17.

sense of collective mentality to serve specific political needs.[14] Leo Shin, examining the Ming dynasty southern frontier, argues that the idea of Chineseness was fostered through Han people's increased contacts with non-Han others and eventually factored in the formation of a Han-centric ethnic discourse.[15] Such attempts to reveal the constructive essence of certain traits of the frontier are also seen in environmental studies. Jonathan Schlesinger, by focusing on the cultural connotations of pearls, mushrooms, and fur, argues that the image of the frontier's pristine nature was in fact invented by the Qing court in response to the 19th century large-scale Han immigration to the empire's northern frontiers.[16] David Bello, along a similar line, identifies ecology as a variable for ethnicity formation as the Manchu rulers correspondently related certain ethnic traits to specific ecological settings.[17] From both ethnic and environmental perspectives, these scholars have considerably challenged the Sinicization paradigm in Chinese frontier history.

Other scholars deployed the lens of gender and religion to examine center-frontier relations. In *Goddess on the Frontier*, Megan Bryson points out how the binary concepts of Chineseness-barbarity or center-periphery are gendered as the center controlled the image of frontier female as one way to instill imperial ideology.[18] Johan Elverskog, in *Our Great Qing*, challenges the presupposition that Tibetan Buddhism functioned as an ideological tool for the Manchus to culturally integrate the Mongols into the empire. Instead, he argues that this was true only for a short period during the Qianlong dynasty and that very different types of state-religion relations persisted in

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[14] Crossley, *A Translucent Mirror: History and Identity in Qing Imperial Ideology*; "Making Mongols," in Sutton Donald, Siu Helen, and Crossley Panela, eds., *Empire at the Margins: Culture, Ethnicity, and Frontier in Early Modern China*, 58-83.
[15] Shin, *The Making of the Chinese State: Ethnicity and Expansion on the Ming Borderlands*.
[16] Schlesinger, *A World Trimmed with Fur : Wild Things, Pristine Places, and the Natural Fringes of Qing Rule*.
[17] Bello, *Across Forest, Steppe and Mountain: Environment, Identity and Empire in Qing China's Borderlands*.
[18] Bryson, *Goddess on the Frontier: Religion, Ethnicity, and Gender in Southwest China*.

other periods.[19] Research privileging the frontier allows historians to examine center-frontier interaction from various perspectives and thus reveals more nuance to understand how imperial apparatuses worked.

Rejecting the frontier's subordinate role in relation to the center and acknowledging the subfield to be productive for revisiting many aspects of Chinese history, frontier history also allows for a trans-regional framework through which China may be understood in a macro-regional and even global context. This, I argue, indicates the newest trend in Chinese frontier history. Evelyn Rawski's *Early Modern China and Northeast Asia* is a welcome attempt in this regard. By erasing obstacles that the modern nation-state framework has posed to historical studies, Rawski proposes that Northeast Asia should be understood as an analytical category on its own. If scholars could investigate the region's historical development in its own right, then we might develop a new and deeper understanding of certain political events and cultural phenomenon in Korea, Japan, Manchurian China, and Russia.[20] By so doing, Rawski proposes to unveil the diversity embedded in northeast Asian social-cultural landscape and revisit the region's history as a product of constant trans-regional interaction.

This dissertation is inspired by the aforementioned historiographical trajectory in three ways. First, it perceives the highland, as the Ming's northwest frontier, not as a place homogenized by the political center but as a region featuring diversity. It allows us to investigate the various approaches that the Ming adopted to its interaction with the highland society, and hence questions the conventional narrative that portrays the Ming as a purely Han-centered empire that only aimed at Sinicizing frontier regions.

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[19] Elverskog, *Our Great Qing*.
[20] Rawski, *Early Modern China and Northeast Asia*.

By examining the Ming's flexible policies toward the highland, this dissertation highlights the imperial characteristics of the Ming as a multi-ethnic/cultural political entity. In this regard, we may even push further to question the image created by the New Qing History school that highlights the peculiarity of the Qing empire. If the Ming was also able to adopt different methods to interact and govern various frontier regions, to what extent was the Qing special in this vein?

Secondly, this dissertation, in addition to traditional political and economic perspectives, also widely consults environmental history, ethnic studies, religious studies, and material culture studies to examine frontier history from a bottom-up perspective. These disciplines not only help to excavate the agency of the highland society in providing the driving force for geopolitical changes, but also serve as a superb lens to examine previously unnoticed nuances in the highland's interaction with the Ming.

Thirdly, this dissertation adopts a trans-regional perspective and argues that the highland was an area of contestation in which the Ming was only one among several players in the game. The highland was a place through which various types of people, goods, and information flowed constantly. With different communities flocking to the highland—carrying with them their diverse languages, religions, commodities, and epistemes, the region soon became a place where new ideas and norms overwrote old principles. Power struggles on the ground thus became dynamic, and the perception of various social groups for the highland were oftentimes at odds. This dissertation argues that it is exactly in such encounters, clashes, negotiations, and compromises that the highland provided driving forces for geopolitical changes.

Finally, let us go back to the earlier question: why choose to study this seemingly unimportant frontier? I argue that just because this frontier was not particularly

important or special from the Ming intellectuals' perspective, it functions as a reference point for us to understand other frontiers in a comparative framework. Quite unlike the Ming's other peripheral regions where military actions frequently took place, the relatively peaceful highland region represents the normal status of a frontier, whereas the highly charged Ming-Mongol borderland was peculiar in comparison and thus not representative. Therefore, observations drawn from the highland allow greater breadth for comparative studies in which scholars may detect shared experiences, tactics, and policies in the Ming's other frontier regions. The highland, in this respect, was probably the least special Ming frontier, but it was also the most standard frontier through which the Ming's overall attitude toward frontiers was revealed. Thus, the highland's meaning to the Ming requires reevaluation, and its history requires revision.

Materials and Methodologies

This dissertation chiefly examines four types of primary sources. The first type is Ming court records, mainly the Ming Silu (The Veritable Records of the Ming Dynasty 明實錄), imperial edicts, and imperial memorials, and they constitute a considerable portion of the source base of this dissertation. Though created by the Ming court and thus reflecting the Ming's perspective, these records include details, often from transcribed memorials, that other sources could not provide. However, it is also important to note that many court policies were defined one way at court, but executed in the highland in another.

The second type of primary source is local materials that include, but are not limited to local gazetteers, atlases, military defense guidebooks, and local private writings. These primary sources, compared with the first type, were usually locally produced and hence entail more on-the-ground information. However, because of

their diversified genres, it would be dangerous to lump them together and simplify them as materials of elite perspective. The ideas of literati on the frontier might differ from military men, and one gazetteer might provide opposing comments on certain issue than the other one. Such a wide array of voices needs to be treated carefully so as to avoid the appearance of an undifferentiated "Ming people" perspective.

The third type are primary sources in non-Han languages. These include religious history accounts and hagiographies in Tibetan and biographies and chronicles in Mongolian. Despite the fact that such non-Chinese language materials are not written contemporaneously but are produced in later periods, they still allow for a non-China-centric point of view through which to understand highland history. However, hegemonic voices in these materials also require careful close reading. For example, many Tibetan materials about this region were produced after the 16th century, when the Geluk school became the dominating sectarian of Tibetan Buddhism. Therefore, when describing issues related to non-Geluk schools or even anti-Geluk forces, such materials oftentimes manipulated the narrative. Modern readers should not take these sources at face value and must compare them with other sources for the sake of accuracy.

The fourth type of primary source are what I consider as unpublished, on-the-ground materials. These include stone tablet inscriptions, genealogies, or land contracts that are still scattered in rural areas and preserved by peasants and herders. Such private accounts are quite valuable because they let the voice of as yet silent grassroots to be heard. Also, it enables scholars to examine the frontier ramifications of center-imposed social and political norms. Still, many of these sources are in rough condition, and thus they are oftentimes hard to read. Meanwhile, because they were produced in the local settings and usually in a later historical period, the descriptions

in these sources at best provide only certain aspects of the story but definitely not the whole picture.

In this dissertation, all these types of primary sources are examined with particular attention as to how and why they were produced. This is important because I use materials written by outsiders to reconfigure the history of the highland. Without question, these materials may be quite biased, either in the political or the cultural sense, and they at best only reveal parts of the picture. In this regard, reading between the lines is necessary to discern what happened on the ground and how they were portrayed for specific reasons. Keeping in mind such possible corruptions in texts can help to extract relatively objective information through close reading.

In order to manage these materials, this project particularly draws on cultural anthropology and digital humanities methods to reveal the natural complexity of borderland society. This dissertation first follows an ontological turn in the field and consults anthropological approaches to recalibrate a borderland logic. It relies on personal fieldwork to collect materials in the rural settings. The relative scarcity of official textual records on the highland history makes it necessary to turn to everyday manuscripts that are unknown to most scholars. It is equally important to collect oral materials during fieldwork, such as fragments of the historical records preserved in epics, folk songs, and local legends. These oral interviews expose a local cosmology which reflects the indigenous conceptualization of history and their perception of interactions with the outside world.

This dissertation also utilizes digital humanities approaches to reveal a detailed process of borderland power negotiation. Due to the scarcity of textual records of borderland history, digital humanities has become a new methodological trend in frontier studies. Through scientific data collected during fieldwork, this dissertation

intends to establish three-dimensional topographical models via GIS mapping to visualize the spatial pattern of borderland military garrisons, Buddhist monasteries, and indigenous villages. This dissertation also adopts regulatory expression approaches, with the help of MARKUS, to conduct data mining and topic modeling of a large digitalized corpus. With digital humanities techniques, this dissertation intends to visualize the social dynamics of a mountainous borderland region that may be unknown to previous scholars, such as the mapped power relation between military and religious institutions and the correlation between the strength of indigenous community leaders, the frequency and intensity of tribute interactions, and the construction of routes.

Chapter Outlines

In addition to the Introduction and Conclusion (Chapters 1 and 7), the main body of this dissertation has five chapters. Organized chronologically, each of these chapters focuses on one specific type of vision for the highland. By investigating how different groups of people or individuals understood the highland, this dissertation charts the historical evolution of the highland from 1368 to 1600.

Chapter 2, "Emperors," charts how the Ming emperor's understanding of the highland was the driving force for the region's tremendous change between the 1370s and 1390s. The highland during the Mongol era was the strategic gate through which the Yuan dynasty administrated many Tibet-related affairs. Its geopolitical relevance did not change much after the Yuan-Ming dynastic transition. To protect the Ming's communications with Tibet and to prevent the Mongol's continuing interaction with its Inner Asian allies, the Ming founder Zhu Yuanzhang mounted a series of military campaigns against Mongol remnants in the area and eventually subordinated the highland non-Han secular and religious leaders. At the same time, the Ming emperor

also extensively changed the ethnic make-up of the highland population by promoting large-scale military migration. Many Han soldiers flocked to the region, settled down in Han-exclusive military towns, and hence marked the change of the highland's political and social landscape in the ensuring centuries.

Chapter 3, "Lords," takes the lens of certain highland figureheads to examine how they perceived the power structure of the highland society. In the early 15th century, these power dynamics were based on an exclusive social structure in which highland inhabitants grouped themselves in a dichotomous manner. Meanwhile, religion functioned as another source of legitimacy for highland rulership. When the Ming's tributary system was recognized as one way to incorporate the highland into its imperial orbit, the highland regime leaders also mimicked this system and created a highland version of a tributary system in the mountains. With their strong military powers and religious authority, it was these regional leaders, not the Ming, that determined the social norms of the highland society.

Chapter 4, "Monks," adopts the perspective of Tibetan Buddhist monks in the highland and examines how they reshaped the region's religious landscape from the mid to late 15th century. Although Tibetan Buddhism was not intrinsic to many highland communities, many Tibetan Buddhists made full use of the preferential treatment they received from the Ming court to facilitate the spread of Tibetan Buddhism in the region. Relying on lineage networks or taking advantage of institutional loopholes, Tibetan Buddhists actively engaged with highland society in the mid-15th century, and thus accomplished the rapid dissemination of Tibetan Buddhism that reconfigured the local social structure.

Chapter 5, "Soldiers," explores the significance of the highland through the eyes of Ming soldiers in the late 15th and mid-16th century. In the late 15th century, the

highland was a place where indigenes overpowered Ming soldiers. Many Ming soldiers were bullied, killed, and captured by the highland inhabitants and thus forced to enter the highland in a passive way. In the early 16th century, as a response to the rising Mongol threat, the Ming implemented large-scale reforms in its highland military. However, treating these new programs as opportunities to escape from heavy military duties, many Ming soldiers simply deserted into the highland, thus proactively de-Sinicizing themselves and altering the ethnic make-up of the highland society.

The last chapter, Chapter 6, "Nomads," traces how the Mongols changed their perception of the highland from time to time in the late 16th century. Treating the highland as a military shelter, a religious bridge for Tibetan Buddhism, and a new settlement with abundant subjects and resources, the Mongols gradually transformed a half-controlled, half-autonomous military buffer zone to a new piece of territory with strategic importance. Such geopolitical changes stimulated the Ming to change its policies and perceptions of the highland in turn, which eventually resulted in the incorporation of the highland into the Ming's imperial realm. By the late 16th century, the highland transformed from a borderland into a border.

Chapter 2: Emperors

Place names in China can be strange due to historical reasons. For example, scholars interested in Ming history may get confused when they travel in Lintan (臨潭), a small county in Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (甘南藏族自治州) of Gansu Province. Famous for its impressive early Ming city wall, Lintan also attracts historians of Ming China with the local people's colorful historical memory. Nowadays, many Lintan inhabitants can still vividly recount stories of their adventurous early Ming ancestors, and many of these tales are supported by the detailed records in the yellowing genealogies that several Lintan families have preserved for centuries. But one would hardly believe that these ancient monuments and unfading legends cannot be found in the Lintan Old Town (臨潭舊城), where grandiose government buildings and fancy shopping malls are located; conversely, they are scattered in a place called Lintan New Town (臨潭新城). After all, a place bearing the designation of new, in northwest China, could easily be mistaken for a modern-era migration hub without much history and traceable past. Yet Lintan subverts outsiders' common sense.

Lintan New Town is called as such for a reason. During the Ming dynasty, the region enjoyed much weightier geopolitical importance than it does today. Known as Taozhou in the early 14th century, the Lintan Old Town functioned as the regional commercial center. Yet when the Ming dynasty founder Zhu Yuanzhang (朱元璋 1328-1398) ordered his army into the region, he was informed of hostile sentiment among the Taozhou indigenes. Therefore, instead of stationing the troops in Taozhou

city, Zhu had a completely new walled fortress constructed to house the soldiers and also repress the animosity among the locals. This military base hence bore the name of "New Town" in the local context.

What happened in Taozhou was not unique. In the late 14th century, the emperor ordered large-scale military migration to many places in the Ming's newly conquered northwest highland. As hundreds of thousands of Ming soldiers flocked into the region, the social and cultural landscape of the previously underpopulated highland were reconfigured. The somewhat confusing designation of Lintan New Town, in this regard, was only the tip of the iceberg. This chapter examines how the Ming emperor perceived the newly annexed highland, positioned it in his imperial blueprint, and reshaped the region's landscape through his policy. Through an examination of the geopolitical role of the highland between East and Inner Asian worlds, its position and function in the emperor's eyes, and the tension between highland locals and newcomers, this chapter illustrates how the highland entered a new epoch through a bumpy road.

Resurrecting Sino-Tibetan Interactions

As a crossroads that connects the Chinese heartland with the Inner Asian world, the highland region has been considered as the gateway to the Tibetan plateau. This section situates the region's strategic importance in the context of Ming-Tibet interaction during the early years of Zhu Yuanzhang's reign. It argues that the half decade between 1369 to 1374 was the decisive period for the Ming to establish contact with Tibet and that the value of the highland was greatly cherished by the Ming court because of its role in facilitating such interactions.

Due to its geographical location, the highland region has been long considered the outpost for Sino-Tibetan interaction, with its eastern part identified in Tibetan

historiography as the intersection of Chinese and Tibetan cultural and political realms.[21] This geopolitical role was clearly recognized from the Mongol era. In 1269, the Yuan dynasty founder Qubilai (忽必烈 1215-1294) established the Tufan and Vicinity Pacification Commission (吐蕃等處宣慰司) in the highland, and later chose the city of Hezhou（河州）as its administrative center.[22] Being the very first Yuan dynasty local administrative office in the great Tibetan region and a subdivision of the central Office of Buddhism and Tibet (宣政院), the Tufan and Vicinity Pacification Commission was not only granted direct control over a vast territory in contemporary east Qinghai, South Gansu, and Northwest Sichuan, but also played an important role in many Tibet-related political, economic, and religious affairs.[23]

The highland region's administrative function and geopolitical role in Yuan dynasty Tibet world greatly affected its position in the early Ming imperial blueprint. It was initially abandoned by the Ming's frontline general for its dense non-Han population. In 1369, the Ming army marched into the region and took over the regional administrative center of Hezhou. But the commander Feng Sheng (馮勝) soon ordered a retreat, including the confiscation of all portable properties and captives, and burned the entire city down. Although criticized by his contemporaries for being extremely shortsighted, Feng Sheng, holding a somewhat racist viewpoint, considered Hezhou a non-Han place beyond civilization and thus not worth keeping.[24]

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[21] Zhang, *Yuandai Tubo Difang Xingzheng Tizhi Yanjiu*,188. Dayang zongba banjue sangbu, *Hanzang Shiji*, 144.
[22] For the establishment time of the office, see Chen, "Yuandai guosima xuanweisi de shezhi niandai he mingcheng," in Chen, *Chen Qingying Zangxue Lunwen Ji*, 332; for Hezhou's position in the administrative unit, see Zhang, *Yuandai Tubo Difang Xingzheng Tizhi Yanjiu*, 185-188. This dissertation transcribes 吐蕃 as Tufan. For reasonings, see Toh, "'Tufan' yuanchu 'tu (tou)fa' wenti xiyao," in Toh, *Lishi Yuwenxue Luncong Chubian*, 70-98.
[23] For details of Tufan and Vicinity Pacification Commission, see Z hang, *Yuandai Tubo Difang Xingzheng Tizhi Yanjiu*, 179-214. For the geographical range under the office's administration, see Yuanshi, juan 63, dili 6, Heyuan fulu; Mingshi juan 330, xiyu 2.
[24] Yu, *Jishi Lu Jianzheng*, 318.

The city was not left wasteland for too long. In May of 1370, only one year after Feng Sheng's raid, Hezhou was recaptured by the Ming army under the command of general Deng Yu (鄧愈). Although the situation did not improve and actually worsened, this time the Ming troops stayed, most likely at the court's request. This is probably because the Ming court had already noticed the strategic value of Hezhou. Regardless of its non-Han character, the area's potential to grant the Ming access to the Inner Asian world, particularly Tibet, must have been promising for the newly founded dynasty. Yet the initial stage of the occupation did not go smoothly. Living in the dilapidated frontier town was not easy for military personnel, and Ming officers began to defect. In July, more than seven hundred soldiers deserted in a single night due to severe starvation.[25] Aware of sinking morale and widespread dissatisfaction, Deng Yu could do nothing other than give touching speeches and reiterate army values. Fortunate for him, many soldiers were eventually convinced to stay.[26] In the coming months, it was these soldiers, fed on bitter ferns and surrounded by corpses, who managed to build a new Hezhou.[27]

I propose that the reason for the sharp reversal of Hezhou's fate in just one year lies in the emperor's gradual realization of the region's importance in facilitating Sino-Tibetan interactions. The turning point was the surrender of certain iconic figures. In 1370, shortly after Deng Yu retook Hezhou, the half-ruined city witnessed the arrival of several Yuan officials led by a certain He Sonam-po (何鎖南普).[28] Not just someone with a prestigious family background, He Sonam-po was the last Yuan dynasty pacification commander-in-chief (吐蕃等處宣慰使司都元帥) of Tufan and

[25] Yu, *Jishi Lu Jianzheng*, 316.
[26] Yu, *Jishi Lu Jianzheng*, 316.
[27] Yu, *Jishi Lu Jianzheng*, 318.
[28] Yu, *Jishi Lu Jianzheng*, 310.

Vicinity Pacification Commission. In other words, he was not only the highest official overseeing Hezhou, but also Tibet-related affairs in the entire eastern fringe of the Tibetan plateau. From then on, more and more Ming officials and commanders began to recognize the region not as the terminus of the Chinese cultural realm, but rather as the outpost to exert Ming empire's influence, if not total control, over Tibet.

The high geopolitical value of the region is most clearly highlighted by the Ming's attempts at establishing diplomatic relations with and collecting intelligence from central Tibet. In June 1370, less than two months after occupying Hezhou, Zhu Yuanzhang named an esteemed monk, Ke Xin (克新 1321-1370), as his envoy and dispatched him to deliver an imperial order to the Tibetans.[29] Two months later in August, a second envoy named Kunga Sonam (鞏哥鎖南) made his way to Tibet.[30] The purpose of these missions, as one Ming imperial edict shows, was to build a hierarchical system in which the Ming was the suzerain and Tibet the subordinate. Such a vision for the regional world order, I argue, was a restoration of the Mongol model. In this regard, sending two envoys in a row within a short time indicates Zhu Yuanzhang's great eagerness to establish contact with Tibet. Such impatience attests to the emperor's anxiety because foreign acknowledgements of his rulership did not meet his expectation. Scholars have pointed out that the emperor considered visits by foreign envoys as public confirmations of his legitimacy, especially to his domestic subjects.[31] By the time he dispatched envoys to Tibet, Zhu Yuanzhang's court had received several embassies from Champa, Dai Viet, and Koryo, but nothing from the rest of Asia.[32] The emperor was longing to see more people from afar.

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[29] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 7. For Ke Xin's political and religious life, see Deng, "Mingchu Shizang Sengren Kexin Shiji Kao."
[30] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 8.
[31] Brook, Praag, and Boltjes, *Sacred Mandates: Asian International Relations since Chinggis Khan*, 64.
[32] Brook, Praag, and Boltjes, *Sacred Mandates: Asian International Relations since Chinggis Khan*, 65-66.

To Zhu's disappointment, the envoys could not live up to his expectations. Though Ke Xin passed away en route before he even made to the plateau,[33] Kunga Sonam did not achieve much either: eight months later after his departure, still nothing was heard from him. Thus in May 1371, the impatient emperor sent another delegation to Tibet, but this time with two Hezhou natives as group leaders.[34] In retrospect, the Hezhou envoys did eventually accomplish their missions to facilitate Sino-Tibetan interaction, but the good news did not make it back to the metropole until four years later in 1374. During the years while they were gone, Zhu did not leave his officials in Hezhou unoccupied: they were busy with Tibet-related intelligence collection.

As the outpost for communication with Tibet, Hezhou played an important role in collecting accurate information for the Ming while the court was quite unfamiliar with this westerly neighbor. This is most typically revealed in the case of Jamyang Shakya Gyaltsen (章陽沙加堅贊1340-1373). In 1372, Zhu Yuanzhang received a report from a Hezhou official on an internecine feud in eastern Tibet. The official suggested having Jamyang Shakya Gyaltsen settle it. He was confident that with this Tibetan's help, not only could the clash successfully be dealt with, but also would the submission of the entire eastern Tibet region come along naturally.[35] Upon hearing this idea, Zhu decreed that a jade seal, as well as the title of Anointed State Preceptor (灌頂國師), be conferred upon Jamyang Shakya Gyaltsen , but requested him to relocate to a Hezhou monastery to educate his people.[36]

Zhu Yuanzhang's response was improper in three ways. First and foremost, the emperor obviously did not know how powerful a figure Jamyang Shakya Gyaltsen

[33] Yu, *Jishi Lu Jianzheng*, 328.
[34] Yu, *Jishi Lu Jianzheng*, 337.
[35] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 17.
[36] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 18.

was at the time. He was not an ordinary regional figurehead, but the nephew and successor of Changchub Gyaltsen (絳曲堅贊1302-1364), the founder of the Phagmodrupa government in Tibet. Historians have agreed that around the mid-14th century, the Sakya government, exclusively patronized by the Yuan court to preside over Tibet, had already largely been replaced by the powerful Phagmodrupa government.[37] Immediately after Changchub Gyaltsen passed away, Jamyang Shakya Gyaltsen became the most powerful figure in central Tibet, and both his secular and religious authorities were recognized by the Yuan court.[38] Yet the Ming emperor seemed to have no knowledge of him and simply noted him in the court records. Moreover, Zhu Yuanzhang granted him only a religious title, and not even the most prestigious one, but no secular title that reflected his real power and role in Tibet. In addition, the Ming court requested that the Tibetan king move to into its territory and ordered him to educate its Tibetan subjects, which was a ludicrously ill-informed demand by any measure.

The emperor's inappropriate responses stand in sharp contrast with the Hezhou officials' efficient and accurate intelligence-gathering work. The officials in Hezhou were crystal clear about the changing political situation in the Tibetan heartland and suggested the most competent candidate to the court, while the court acted slower in an inattentive manner. Nevertheless, Hezhou still played a significant role in facilitating this first formal contact between the Ming and the most powerful secular ruler of Tibet. Two years later in 1374, it was Hezhou agents again that successfully brought the most prestigious religious leaders of central Tibet to the Ming realm.

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[37] Petech, *Central Tibet and the Mongols: The Yüan-Sa-Skya Period of Tibetan History*.
[38] Banqin suonan chaba, *Xin Hongshi*, 84.

In May 1374, the two long-gone envoys finally made their way back to Hezhou. Together with them were the retainers of Sakya sect Buddhist master Kunga Gyaltsen Palzangpo (公哥堅藏巴藏卜), the descendent of Pakpa (八思巴),[39] the most famous Tibetan Buddhist in the entire Mongol era. Although the Sakya school had lost certain authority in Tibet's secular affairs by the 1370s, it was still highly influential in the religious realm. Recent scholarship has revealed that in the early Ming, Sakya doctrines were continuously popular, not only in Tibet but also in the Chinese heartland, and had greatly dominated the Ming court's Buddhist realm.[40] As a religious leader of the Sakya school and Pakpa's successor, Kunga Gyaltsen Palzangpo's willingness to build a relationship with the Ming, in Zhu Yuanzhang's eyes, was a significant symbol of continued authority over Tibet from the Yuan to Ming, a religious legitimacy the Ming direly needed. Moreover, in addition to various gifts, the delegation brought many Yuan-issued documents to submit to the Ming officials and committed to send 2,000 horses to the Ming every three years as gifts.[41] In this vein, the Ming had acquired certain recognition from Tibet in the secular respect as well. The emperor was delighted by this breakthrough. Therefore, he granted Kunga Gyaltsen Palzangpo the title of "Great State Preceptor of Perfect Wisdom, Marvelous Enlightenment, and Magnificent Teaching" (圓智妙覺弘教大國師).[42] In the whole of the Hongwu reign, this was the only Great State Preceptor title issued to Buddhists and certainly the highest.

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[39]Zhongguo zangxue zhongxin, *Yuan Yilai Xizang Difang Yu Zhongyang Zhengfu Guanxi Dangan Shiliao Huibian*, 82.Although the Ming documents confirmed Kunga Gyaltsen Palzangpo's prestigious status in the Sakya sect, his real identity remained unclear. See Cairang, "Ming Hongwuchao Dui Zangchuan Fojiao de Zhengce Jiqi Xiangguan Shishi Kaoshu," 42-43.

[40] An, *Mingdai Hanyi Zangchuan Mijiao Wenxian Yanjiu*.

[41] Yu, *Jishi Lu Jianzheng*, 383.

[42] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 30.

Thus, the Ming emperor clearly recognized the contribution made by the Hezhou officials, as well as Hezhou's strategic value in connecting Tibet. In July 1374, following the arrival of Kunga Gyaltsen Palzangpo's delegation, Hezhou was elevated as the headquarter of Xi'an Auxiliary Regional Military Commission (西安行都指揮使司), an office designed to preside over the entire Tibetan region.[43] In early Ming imperial blueprints, this adjustment signified the restoration and even expansion of the role of Hezhou as not only one among several, but the highest administrative center of all Tibet. Although being largely Zhu Yuanzhang's fantasy from a retrospective standpoint, the erection of Hezhou as the political center for the Tibetan world marked the consolidation of his authority in the empire's westerly subordinating state. However, Zhu Yuanzhang was not the only one who was aware of the region's importance and intended to control it—the Mongols set their sights there as well.

The Haunting Mongol Shadow

The fact that the last Yuan emperor Toghon-Temür (妥懽帖睦尔) fled to Mongolia in 1368 does not signify the evaporation of Mongol powers in China proper overnight. The severe menace of the Mongol remnants came from far and near to challenge the nascent Ming. The highland region was one such arena. The region's geopolitical function as a crossroads allowed the Mongols to outflank the Ming's forces from all directions, and the local figureheads' opportunistic character created extensive difficulties for the Ming to implement effective control. This section argues that the Ming emperor's policies aimed at these two problems constituted the main reason for the highland's fading Inner Asian character.

[43] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 29.

The Yuan dynasty implemented a multi-layered system of governance in the highland. With officials like He-Sonam-po in charge of civil affairs and Tibet-related issues, military authority was vested in several Mongol princes to prevent potential uproar.[44] During the last days of the Yuan dynasty, there were chiefly three princes residing in the region: Dorjibal (朵爾只巴), the prince of Qi (岐王) who descended from imperial son-in-law Chikü (赤窟) of the Qonggirads (弘吉剌),[45] Budnal (卜納剌), the Pacifier of the West and Prince of Wujing (鎮西武靖王) who was descended from Qubilai's ninth son A'uruqči (奥魯赤),[46] and Qošang (和賞), the prince of Gaochang (高昌) who descended from the Uighur Iduq-qut.[47] One thing these non-Han aristocrats all shared was a personal connection, usually by blood or marriage ties, with the Mongol khans. In other words, they were imperial relatives whose legitimacy derived directly from the political center through non-bureaucratic but aristocratic linkages.

As the Ming forces swept the region, these three Mongol princes all surrendered.[48] Other than Dorjibal who soon regretted his decision, a case I will examine in detail later, both Budnal and Qošang chose to pledge loyalty to the Ming throne. However, their status was soon rendered titular. After their submission, both princes were granted honorary titles as the commanders of a nominal military institute.[49] But this was no more than a political gesture. At that time, Zhu Yuanzhang was concerned

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[44] Shen, "Yuanchao Zhongyang Zhengfu Dui Xizang de Tongzhi."
[45] As the last Qi prince, Dorjibal is not recorded in the prince list of the volume 108 of *Yuanshi*. His name shows up more often in Ming dynasty text, particularily the *Ming Taizu Shilu*. For a comprehensive study on the Qi princes of the Qonggirads, see Hu, "Menggu hongjila bu chiku fuma xi zhuwang yanjiu", in *Xibei minzu wenxian yu lishi yanjiu*, 121-136.
[46] About this princely system, see Zhang, *Yuandai tubo defang xingzheng tizhi yanjiu*, 19-25.
[47] Song, "Gu huaiyuan jiangjun gaochangwei tongzhi zhihuishi sishi heshang gong fenji," in *Songlian quanji, 1090*.
[48] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 8.
[49] For a detailed examination of how Budnal and Qošang were stripped of power by the Ming, see Serruys, "The Mongols of Kansu during the Ming," 231-238.

more with depicting himself as a model ruler who showed benevolence toward the "former Yuan imperial family members,"[50] rather than with granting them substantial power. As a result, although the court promised the princes that their positions would be hereditary, we do not see any mention of the descendants of Budnal and Qošang in Ming documents after 1376.

With the substantial power of Mongol imperial princes taken away, one should not assume that the Ming intended to completely replace the local administrative system with a Han-Chinese style bureaucracy. For this newly occupied territory, in unstable political circumstances, the Ming still preferred to rely on intermediary agents to interact with and govern the locals. Therefore, after enfeebling top-level imperial nobles, the Ming emperor continued to assign local affairs to numerous indigenous non-Han leaders. In Hezhou, for example, among the fifteen senior officials,[51] eleven were Tibetan or Mongol leaders.[52] Thus, these surrendered officers constituted a large portion of the bureaucratic landscape of the region.

Taking on many daily administrative tasks on the ground did not necessarily make the non-Han officials the lords of the highland. They were given less power in the military and politics than their predecessors enjoyed. The regional leaders' daily routine was occupied with drilling, provisioning the military, or lobbying for the submission of other groups. From time to time, they were also responsible for everyday administration such as collecting taxes and conducting censuses. Meanwhile, these regional leaders had to take on the work of postal station officers. As Lane Harris argues, early Ming empire heavily relied on roads to project its

[50] *Ming taizu shilu*, juan 60, 4th year, Month I, gengyin.
[51] Senior here means ranks higher than company commander, including Commander 指揮使, Vice Commander 指揮同知, Assistant Commander 指揮僉事 and Battalion Commander or 千戶.
[52] He, *Hezhou Tusi Hesuonan Jiazu Yanjiu*, 24.

imperial power into frontier regions and maintain effective, long-distance control.[53] And in the highland, such roads were maintained to guarantee transportation between China and Tibet.[54] Although the roads to Tibet were established as early as the mid-13th century, their condition was not ideal and often halted travelers' progress.[55] Therefore, the Ming emperors initiated several rounds of road construction, and non-Han groups were commonly dispatched for these works.[56] The workload at these postal stations was so intensive that the early Ming court considered sending prisoners there as a form of punishment.[57] Treated as cheap labor, some indigenous leaders rebelled, but many others chose to accept the status quo, until the rise of the Mongol Qi Prince Dorjibal brought them hope.

The rough interactions between the Qi Prince Dorjibal and the Ming forces in the highland exemplify the turbulent geopolitical situation in the late 14th century highland. In 1371, after other local figureheads such as He-Sonam-po, Budnal, and Qošang submitted to the Ming, Dorjibal also sent his underlings to the Ming's military office to pledge allegiance. Yet he was merely sounding out the Ming's reaction and did not plan to yield in the end.[58] Later that year, after receiving another call to surrender, Dorjibal dispatched his nephew to Hezhou,[59] and he even offered to marry his daughter to the Ming prince.[60] The main reason that Dorjibal never fully surrendered to the Ming lies in his top position in the Mongol northern Yuan court at the time. One official document excavated from the northern Mongolian desert reveals that in 1371, Dorjibal still exerted great influence on the northern Yuan

[53] Harris, "Into the Frontiers: The Relay System and Ming Empire in the Borderlands, 1368-1449," 5.
[54] Zhao, "Mingdai Neidi Yu Xizang de Jiaotong," 66.
[55] Bawo zulachenwa, "'Xianzhe Xiyan: Gama Gacang' Yizhu," 58.
[56] Chen Qingying, "Mingdai de ganqingchuan zangzu diqu," in Chen, *Chen Qingying Zangxue Lunwen Ji*, 467.
[57] *Ming taizu shilu*, juan 247, 29th year, month IX, bingchen.
[58] Yu, *Jishi Lu Jianzheng*, 332.
[59] Yu, *Jishi Lu Jianzheng*, 341.
[60] Yu, *Jishi Lu Jianzheng*, 356-357.

bureaucracy and could intervene remotely in the court's personnel appointments.[61] He could not simply relinquish these privileges: he would to wait and see how geopolitical situations shifted.

In 1371, the Ming force in the highland was still trying to subjugate Dorjibal through peaceful means. But in 1372 and 1373, tensions escalated, and military clashes began to erupt. This shift resulted from the changing Ming-Mongol power dynamic in the north. In 1372, the Ming launched a large-scale northern expedition to eliminate the Mongol Yuan remnants on the steppe. However, due to strategic mistakes, among other reasons, the Ming's northern expedition was a total failure. Among the campaigns in all directions of north China, the expeditionary army only achieved certain victories in the northwest, but suffered from tremendous causality in the north and northeast where the Ming's main force was completely crushed.

The clash in 1372 changed the balance of power between the Ming and Mongol at the time, and the Ming's defeat may have prompted the surrendered non-Han officers in the region to revisit their relationship with the Ming. What added fuel to the fire was the resurrection of the Mongol's confidence to retake the highland. In January 1373, a Buddhist official was dispatched from the Northern Yuan capital as the state preceptor of Qara-Qorum (和林國師) to the highland to lobby the local figureheads to rebel against the Ming.[62] Although the monk was eventually captured by the Ming army, he had already completed his mission. During the summer of that year, the indigenous leaders in Taozhou secretly contacted Dorjibal. Likely suffering under the Ming's heavy military occupation, these non-Han leaders persuaded Dorjibal to attack the Ming army and agree to be their inside man. This collaboration damaged the Ming

[61]Tala, Du, and Gao, *Zhongguo Cang Heishuicheng Hanwen Wenxian*, vol. 6, 1357.
[62] Yu, *Jishi Lu Jianzheng*, 370.

considerably. At the cost of many able-bodied soldiers, the Ming barely managed to repel the strike.[63]

However, winning one battle did not mean that Dorjibal could win the war. In the face of constant military retaliation by Ming troops, Dorjibal was frequently defeated. Therefore, at the end of 1373, he sent his son to the Ming capital to be a hostage in a gesture of submission.[64] Although the Ming officials considered this act as a stalling tactic to escape the Ming's intensive military campaigns, in retrospect it worked.[65] The two parties did not clash again for another three years.

For the Mongols, the highland's strategic function as the crossroads between East and Inner Asia did not diminish after the dynastic transition. In Autumn 1375, a group of twenty-five envoys was dispatched by the Mongol Liang prince (梁王) in Dali to Qara-Qorum. The envoys' mission was to forge a north-south alliance in order to surround the Ming. The mission travelled more than two thousand miles along the two panhandles of the Sino-Tibetan borderland and the Hexi corridor before they were eventually captured.[66] It is natural to assume that the envoys already had conducted countless secret exchanges with the indigenous leaders over the course of their long journey. Although there are not enough materials to confirm the on-the-ground ramifications of this diplomatic mission, we may speculate a thin connection between this diplomatic mission and the two rebels in 1376 who caused the deaths of several Ming diplomats.

Dorjibal kept a low profile in 1374 and 1375. He maintained a relatively peaceful relationship with the Ming, maintaining his Ming appointed military title and acknowledging the Ming's authority in public. But in hindsight, these were all

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[63] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 23.
[64] *Ming taizu shilu*, juan 86, 6th year, month XII, Bingying.
[65] Song, *Songlian Quanji*, 1537.
[66] Yu, *Jishi Lu Jianzheng*, 394.

strategic moves. Shortly after Dorjibal's 1373 "surrender," the Ming emperor assigned one diplomat, Xiong Ding (熊鼎 ?-1376), to Dorjibal's office, most likely to oversee Dorjibal's daily activities given his provocative actions. Indeed, as soon as Xiong arrived at the Mongol camp, he soon discovered that Dorjibal only pretended his subjugation, waiting for the right moment to rebel once more. After the Ming emperor received his reports, the official was requested to return to the court out of concern for his safety. But it was already too late. In month VI of 1376, Dorjibal finally turned his back on the Ming and murdered Xiong Ding, together with two other diplomats.[67] The emperor was infuriated. But before he dispatched his army to punish Dorjibal's betrayal, another seasoned diplomat, Kunga Sonam, whom the Ming court highly relied upon to communicate with Tibet, was also murdered by pro-Mongol indigenes.[68] It was not until then that Zhu Yuanzhang noticed the prevalence of pro-Mongol sentiment across the region.[69] It is highly likely that the 1375 Mongol envoys from Yunnan had a part in this shift in public opinion, but Dorjibal unquestionably played an important role to fomenting the dissension.

Turmoil caused by the local non-Han leaders' rebellion continued in 1378 and 1379. In mid-1378, scattered upheavals broke out in multiple places in the Qinghai part of the highland. Later that year, further social unrest emerged in the regions to the east and south of Hezhou.[70] All these rebellions were kindled by Dorjibal, who by then was remotely planning more attacks in the area.[71] Zhu Yuanzhang knew that allowing Dorjibal to continue disturbing the social stability of the highland would threat the Ming's entire northern frontier. Therefore, instead of suppressing turmoil on

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[67] *Ming taizu shilu*, juan 106, 9th year, month VI, wusheng.
[68] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 37.
[69] Yu, *Jishi Lu Jianzheng*, 397. Cheng, *Xunyin Chengxiansheng Wenji*, 127.
[70] Huang, *Huangming Kaiguo Gongchen Lu*, 757-758. Zhu, *Ming Taizu Ji*, 13.
[71] *Ming taizu shilu*, juan 126, 12th year, month VIII, renchen.

case-by-case, he planned to mount a large-scale decisive military campaign and solve the problem once and for all.

Zhu Yuanzhang's expedition to put down the highland threats in the late 1370s has received little scholarly attention. However, I argue that it demonstrates the Ming emperor's determination to scour the Mongol shadow from the highland in order to prevent the re-establishment of a Mongol-Tibet alliance, as well as to secure the newly formed Ming-Tibet relationship. Zhu's emphasis on the campaign, as Qin Bo nicely points out in an unpublished article, is evidenced in three aspects. First, Zhu Yuanzhang worshiped the deities of mountain and river twice over the course of the battle, which was a political ritual that the emperor only conducted before campaigns of life and death significance to the entire empire. Second, Zhu dispatched the strongest Ming troops and virtually all his capable commanders to the highland, indicating his strong will to eradicate the Mongol threat. Third, the emperor expanded the campaign from a regional battle in the highland to one that involved the entire Chinese-Tibetan borderland and thus greatly affected the geopolitical landscape of western Sichuan.[72]

As the Ming emperor made up his mind, his frontline commanders and soldiers did not fail the emperor's high expectations. After a series of clashes, the Ming troops finally wiped out the Mongol force in the region. Although Dorjibal was not caught, his name disappeared in Ming texts from that point on, indicating his fading influence in regional geopolitics. As the Mongols became less a military back-up, the highland non-Han leaders had no more choice but to accept the Ming's control. This process, as described by Elliot Sperling when he examines the submission of many Tibetan

[72] Qin, "Lun Hongwuchao de Zhengxi Gongfeng Yu Shiliujue Cefeng Zhi Biaozhun."

figureheads, indicates "the decline of the area's Tibetan character."[73] In fact, in addition to Tibetan character, I argue the region's Inner Asian character faded since the Ming's occupation. This was even more evident when many Han soldiers arrived and settled in the highland as the result of a large-scale military migration.

Chinatown in the Mountains

Before the late 14th century, the highland had been, as the previous sections indicate, a place with dense Inner Asian influence. Although these is no way to assume the exact ratio between Han and non-Han people in the region, Han people were unlikely to be the ethnic majority. But this situation permanently changed. This section examines how and why many Han soldiers settled down in the highland through a case study of Taozhou (洮州).

Despite having cleared up more or less the pro-Mongol forces in the highland by 1379, the Ming's military force in the region was still insufficient. After all, most troops in the 1378 and 1379 battles were transferred from other parts of northern China, such as Henan, Shanxi, and Shaanxi, and even the personal guard army of the Ming emperor was sent to join the northwestern fight.[74] Therefore, immediately after taming the social turmoil, the emperor mounted a large-scale military migration in order to strengthen the Ming's frontier presence. In this way, the highland was gradually transformed into a military society.

By 1380, there was no Ming army in Taozhou, or Lintan Old Town by its modern designation. In the late 1370s, the largest army in the area stationed at the geopolitically important Hezhou. However, from 1376 to 1379, three rebellions erupted in Taozhou one after the other as a result of indigenous leaders' conspiracy

[73] Sperling, "The Ho Clan of Ho-Chou: A Tibetan Family in Service to the Yuan and Ming Dynasties," 365.
[74] *Ming taizu shilu*, juan 121, 11th year, month VI, gengwu.

with Dorjibal.[75] The destruction incensed the Ming emperor. He decided to increase the military power in Taozhou to prevent further unrests. Therefore, in 1379, shortly after putting down the third rebellion, Zhu Yuanzhang transferred half of the Hezhou troops to Taozhou.[76]

To use the terminology of the Ming's military administrative system of guards and battalions (*weisuo* 衛所), the Hezhou army was constituted of two guards, each nominally comprised of 5,600 regular soldiers (正軍).[77] But, as Zhang Yun points out, the actual number would have been higher since many frontier guards were larger in size compared to those in the Chinese heartland.[78] Therefore, around 6,000 to 8,000 regular soldiers in total were transferred to Taozhou.[79] Some of these soldiers were what the Ming's military system categorized as submitters (歸附), those individuals who used to fight for Zhu Yuanzhang's foes but were accepted, registered, and incorporated into the Ming army after their surrender. Others were newcomers as fellow campaigners (從征) and banished soldiers (謫戍) who arrived in the highland from elsewhere. By William Guanglin Liu's estimation, these newcomers took up half of the region's military population.[80] It is these military immigrants' life stories that this section is about.

The military migration changed the social landscape of the highland in many ways. One of the most notable phenomena is the erection of many walled garrisons. In early 1379, still in the middle of the battle, Li Wenzhong (李文忠), a Ming senior court official and also Zhu Yuanzhang's nephew, was dispatched to the highland.[81] Li's

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[75] Hu and Wei, "Mingxing Yeji Yu Mingchu Hezhou Shishi Kaolun."
[76] Zhu, *Ming Taizu Ji*, 174-176.
[77] For a basic introduction of Ming dynasty military institution, see Szonyi, *The Art of Being Governed: Everyday Politics in Late Imperial China*, 37-38.
[78] Zhang, *Yuandai Tubo Difang Xingzheng Tizhi Yanjiu*.
[79] In the case of Xining Guard, the number of regular soldiers was 7,200. SeeYang, *Xining Fu Xinzhi*, 267.
[80] Liu, *The Chinese Market Economy 1000-1500*, 286.
[81] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 46.

primary mission was to supervise military infrastructural construction, especially those pertinent to building, repairing, and walling garrison cities. Among several military bases, Li spent much time and effort on Taozhou, as it was treated as a geopolitical spot that needed urgent strengthening.[82] It is in this context that the Taozhou guard city (洮州衛城), the Lintan New Town illustrated in the opening vignette, was built.

The soldiers transferred from Hezhou were the primary laborers in the building of the Taozhou guard city, and the construction was completed within a mere ten days.[83] Some scholars claim that this unbelievable speed is an exaggeration, but I argue that such records in fact reflect how military settlements in the late 14th century highland were built.[84] One corroborating case is the construction of the Minzhou guard city. When Minzhou was built in late 1378, the soldiers were required to concentrate on garrison walls and moats as well as infrastructure works like weeding and paving, over improving their own barracks. The soldiers thus had to wait for several more months until something with a roof was erected in the city.[85] The Taozhou guard city was most likely constructed in a similar manner: what was completed within ten days was only the most basic infrastructure of the garrison, while most buildings were not there yet. The rushed construction reflected the Ming emperor's intent to use heavy military presence to intimidate the indigenes, dissuading them from engaging in future collusion with the Mongols.

The intimidating character of these military bases is also demonstrated in the location the Taozhou guard city, the Lintan New Town. The site of the garrison was

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[82] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 46-48.
[83] Zhang, *Lintan Jinshi Wenchao*, 30.
[84] Que, "Cong weisuo zhidu dao shehui jingguan: dui taozhouwei de lishi renleixue kaocha," in Zhao, *Changcheng Neiwai*, 247.
[85] Minxianzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui bangongshi, *Minzhou Zhi Jiaozhu*, 33-34.

not randomly chosen but decided after meticulous strategic consideration. An inscription implies that it was only twenty steps away from the Zhudanghagai Temple (竹當哈蓋寺), a Tibetan Buddhist monastery that had been influential in the area for hundreds of years.[86] This suggests that the garrison was likely built to intimidate the local Tibetan Buddhist community, who were potential threats from the perspective of the Ming empire.

Apart from strategic reasons, distinctive physical environmental factors also influenced the location of the Ming's military bases. Fig. 2.1 indicates the spatial distribution of the military garrisons across Taozhou's mountainous terrain. It is clear that military infrastructure was either built along the Tao River or the mountain passes leading to the intermountain basin where the Taozhou Guard sat. According to one local source, the Ming troops only tried once to build a fortress on the south side of the Tao River.[87] But it was quickly abandoned, highlighting the Ming's inability to install effective control beyond the relatively flat region on the north side of the Tao River.

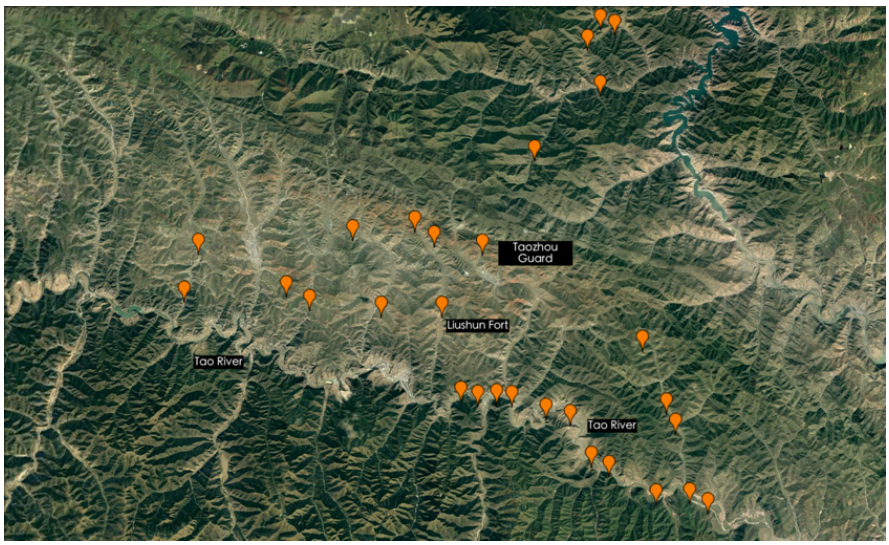

Fig. 2.1: Military garrisons in Taozhou

[86] Zhang, *Lintan Jinshi Wenchao*, 37.
[87] "Zhengtong Si Nian Shengzhi."

Establishing many more settlements with heavy military characters in the highland, the Ming emperor also implemented some ethnic segregation policies. In 1379, Zhu Yuanzhang issued several imperial edicts to the generals in Taozhou. With line after line accusing the indigenes of corrupt morality and brutal barbarity, the emperor ordered his officers to drive all the non-Han inhabitants out of the Taozhou guard city.[88] Similarly, all non-Han people were forced to move out of Maozhou in the Sichuan part of the highland in 1382.[89] For those non-Han groups scattered in the region, the Ming strictly demanded that the indigenous leaders keep an eye on their subjects in case they wandered outside of their proper territory.[90] In the initial stage of its occupation, the Ming wished to create a social landscape demarcated by ethnicity. Such an ethnically segregated landscape, I argue, even paralleled the Manchu cities during the Qing, which, according to Mark Elliot, were the "sites of the re-formation of Manchu ethnicity."[91] When an ethnic minority group entered a region of ethnic majority, forming a compact community seemed to be a commonly adopted way to maintain its integrity.

For the numerous Ming soldiers who were quite unfamiliar with the area, living in this newly incorporated frontier was not easy. Modern historians seldom have the opportunity to learn the life details of voiceless people like the Ming dynasty foot soldiers. But during my fieldwork in 2017, I was fortunate to find some unpublished primary source containing such extensive details. The local materials I found in this region include multiple genealogies and three Ming dynasty imperial edicts that were issued in the thirteenth year of Hongwu (1380) and the fourth and fifth years of Zhengtong (1439 and 1440) respectively (Fig. 2.2-2.4). These materials provide

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[88] Zhu, *Ming Taizu Ji*, 175.
[89] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 61.
[90] Lattimore, "The Frontier in History," 115.
[91] Elliott, *The Manchu Way: The Eight Banners and Ethnic Identity in Late Imperial China*, 90.

personal accounts which reveal the whole process of military migration and settlement in the late 14th century.

Fig. 2.2: Ming dynasty imperial edict, 13th year, Hongwu Reign

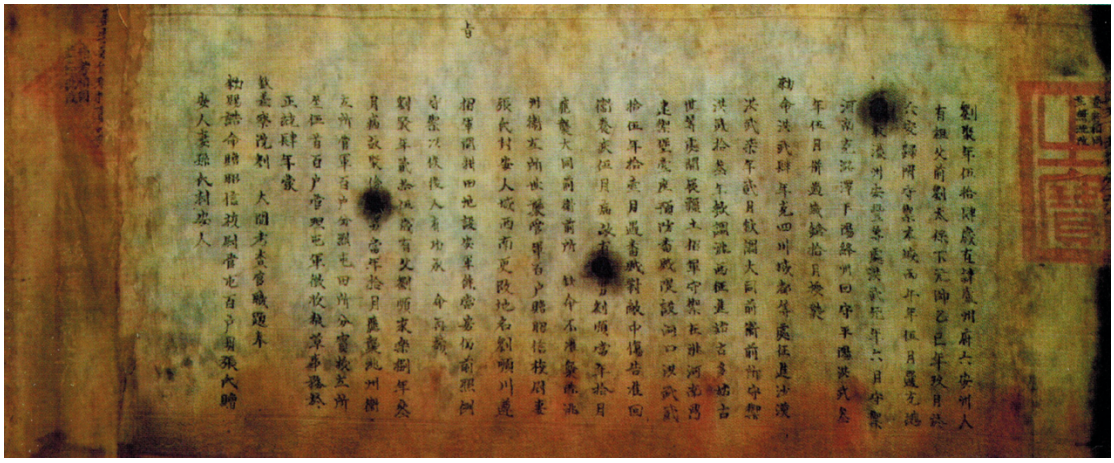

Fig. 2.3: Ming dynasty imperial edict, 4th year, Zhengtong Reign

Fig. 2.4: Ming dynasty imperial edict, 5th year, Zhengtong Reign

Despite having several thousands of soldiers relocated to Taozhou in the 1370s, Zhu Yuanzhang was not satisfied with what happened on the ground. Therefore, in 1380, more soldiers were transferred to Taozhou from various regions of China, including one named Liu Gui (劉貴). Liu Gui joined the Ming army as early as 1365 and fought for the emperor in various places from the lower Yangtze delta, to the central plain, and the Sichuan basin. Then, in 1375, Liu Gui was dispatched to the northern frontier, officially registered as a military household in the Front Guard of Datong (大同前衛) in Shanxi under the title of company commander (百戶 also translated as centurion), but summoned to go to Taozhou in 1380.[92]

From the imperial edicts, we can speculate that Liu Gui's transfer initially was meant to be temporary. His main job was to suppress scattered rebels, guard the Ming-occupied territory, and construct more fortresses in the region. He was even granted the privilege to recruit soldiers himself,[93] which indicates the severe personnel shortage that the Taozhou military was facing. By 1392, although large-scale rebellions in the region were gradually put out, turmoil still took place to challenge the Ming's control over the region here and there. Even a seasoned veteran like Liu Gui, who had fought for the Ming army for fifteen years by this point, was wounded in one of these skirmishes and died thousands of miles away from his hometown in the lower Yangtze delta.[94]

Liu Gui's death made his son, Liu Shun (劉順), feel that their 'temporary' mission in this northwest strange land had officially ended. After all, his father had died for it. Therefore, in the autumn of 1392, Liu Shun sent a memorial to the court and pleaded to move back to Datong, where the Liu military household was originally registered.

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[92] "Zhengtong Si Nian Shengzhi."
[93] "Hongwu Shisan Nian Shengzhi."
[94] "Zhengtong Si Nian Shengzhi."

Obviously, a place like Taozhou—where people continued to suffer from food shortage, cold weather, ethnic animosity, and loneliness—was not an ideal station in the eyes of Liu Shun. But the request was turned down by the emperor, followed by another imperial edict that forever changed the fate of the Liu lineage. In 1392, the Liu household was bestowed, or we may even say *forced*, to accept a hereditary military position in Taozhou, meaning the lineage had to live there permanently. Probably as a form of compensation, the emperor bestowed a piece of fertile land on Liu Shun and renamed the region Liushun Chuan (劉順川), meaning the Riverside of Liu Shun.[95] The name still persists today.

Knowing that returning to Datong was not an option anymore, Liu Shun could only live with the status quo. The first thing he did was to build himself a place to live. Although not implied in any historical material, my personal fieldwork suggests it reasonable to assume that Liu Shun chose the location for his fortress, Liushun Fort (劉順堡), following the same logic for Taozhou guard city. Liu Shun's fortress sits right in front of a mountain pass which connects the Taozhou guard city to the Tao river (see Map 1). This indicates that the Liu Shun's concern was strategic: to keep Taozhou safe. Meanwhile, the fort was built within the vicinity of the Yuanjue Monastery (Chi: 園覺寺 Tib: yer ba dgon bsam grub gling), a Tibetan Buddhist monastery with great influence among the locals.[96] When I talked with Mr. Liu, the local village leader and the direct descendent of Liu Shun, he constantly attacked the capriciousness of the Tibetans in the region and claimed that the existence of this fort was the only reason that these Tibetans had been relatively well-behaved. Despite the fact that there is no way to verify whether Mr. Liu's 14th century ancestor understood

[95] "Zhengtong Si Nian Shengzhi." Modern-day place name is 流順川。
[96] Zhiguanba Gongquehu danba raoji, *Anduo Zhengjiaoshi*, 628-629.

his mission in this way, the relationship between the indigenes and the newcomers, as shown in the previous section, was undoubtedly tense.

Having built a fort in a strategic location, Liu Shun's next mission was to gather enough able-bodied men to guard the place. Just like his father who had to hire soldiers by himself, Liu Shun was also required to do so on his own. The way Liu Shun did this was through land. He must have known that in the mountainous Taozhou region, a relatively fertile riverside land was quite attractive. Therefore, he advertised his plowable land and convinced people to stay.[97] Moreover, Liu Shun wanted people who came and worked the land to be not just short-term military tenants but permanent settlers. Therefore, he required that regular soldiers bring their wives and supernumeraries with them.[98] Liu Shun hoped that, with the help of farmland, the new soldiers could treat the region as home, just as he had done.

With the hard work of Liu Gui and Liu Shun, the Liu lineage gradually put down roots in Taozhou and still live there today. But their life stories are but one drop in the ocean. Scholars have estimated that by the end of Hongwu's reign, there were approximately 17,000 soldiers registered in the Hezhou, Taozhou and Minzhou armies as regular soldiers (正軍), and another 34,000 stationed as military household housemen or supernumeraries (舍人/軍余).[99] In comparison, only 12,000 were registered as civilians.[100] It is not an overstatement to say that at the end of the 14th century, the region had already become a military hub.

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[97] "Zhengtong Si Nian Shengzhi." 遵招軍開耕田地。

[98] "Zhengtong Si Nian Shengzhi."設安軍餘當房. In the Ming dynasty military household system (軍戶), there were not only regular soldiers, but also supernumeraries or military household housemen (軍余/舍人) whose main job was to company the regular soldier in the military station and cope with the logistic issues, such as cooking, tailoring, and farming. ., In Taozhou, unlike what was regulated by the court that each regular soldier could have one supernumerary, the ratio between regular soldier and supernumeraries was 1:2. This was most likely related to the low quality and scarcity of the Taozhou farmlands where the labor support provided by one supernumerary was not enough. For more analysis on the ratio between regular soldier and supernumeraries, seeCao, *Zhongguo Yimin Shi: Ming Shiqi*, 297.

[99] Cao, *Zhongguo Yimin Shi: Ming Shiqi*, 320.

[100] Liu, *The Chinese Market Economy 1000-1500*, 286.

Summary

This chapter has charted the tremendous change that took place in the highland society from the 1370s to the 1390s as part of the Ming dynasty founder Zhu Yuanzhang's imperial designs. Connecting the Chinese heartland to the vast Inner Asian world, the highland was the strategic gate through which the Yuan dynasty administrated many Tibet-related affairs during the Mongol era. The area's geopolitical role was also valued by Zhu Yuanzhang, who greatly relied upon the highland region to act as a diplomatic bridge to build connections with Tibetan religious and secular hierarchs, as well as an outpost for intelligence collection. To protect the Ming's communications with Tibet and to prevent Mongol's continuing interaction with its Inner Asian allies, the Ming further mounted a series of military campaigns against Mongol remnants in the area. Successfully eliminating the influence of Dorjibal, the Ming force had the highland non-Han leaders under control. The third stage for the Ming's penetration of the highland revolved around changing the region's settlement pattern. After implementing large-scale military migration, the Ming emperor extensively reconfigured the ethnic makeup of the highland population. Many Han soldiers flocked to the region, settled down in Han-exclusive military towns, and thus contributed to ethnic segregation.

The social and political landscape of the highland considerably changed within the two decades of the late 14th century following the Yuan-Ming dynastic transition. This chapter points out that Ming China's imperial project and the arrival of Ming forces in the highland indeed provided the driving force for the changing of local power dynamics. These reconfigurations of the social order paved the way for the highland region's further economic, religious, and social development.

Chapter 3: Lords

The mountainous highland was not an easily accessible world to the Ming soldiers. Although they were able to muscle their way into the region and occupy important transportation intersections, towns, and other strategic spots, these new players of the highland's geopolitical game could not penetrate deep into the realm in the early 15th century. The mountain society in the highland, therefore, was quite on its own. However, this does not necessarily mean that the mountain inhabitants did not interact with the Ming; on the contrary, they had maintained frequent contact with the Chinese dynasties for centuries. In the 10th and 11th centuries, the highland inhabitants carried out active tea-horse trade with the Song dynasty primarily because the great, tall mounts raised in the highland were considered fine warhorses from Song China's perspective.[101] In the 12th and 13th centuries, multiple highland communities acknowledged the authority of the Mongol suzerain by accepting official titles, seals and letter-patents granted by the Yuan authority.[102] The highland society, unlike that of the Zomia world in the Scottian sense, maintained various types of interaction with lowland political entities.

In that regard, how then should we measure the influence of these Chinese dynasties on the mountain society? The short and sweet answer is that the impact was quite dynamic: when the Chinese dynasties were relatively strong, their presence in the highland were also much more visible; when the Chinese dynasties weakened,

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[101] Smith, *Taxing Heaven's Storehouse: Horses, Bureaucrats, and the Destruction of the Sichuan Tea Industry, 1074-1224*, 278.
[102] Luciano, "Yuan Organization of the Tibetan Border Areas," 369-380.

their authority, as the reasoning goes, was less recognized by the highland indigenous rulers. In the early 14th century when the Mongols' influences began to dwindle in the region, the highland leaders were allowed more control over their local subjects, which was a change that Petech Luciano claims to have "apparently implied an increased degree of local autonomy."[103] Such considerable autonomy of the highland society, I argue, did not change much in the early 15th century.

This chapter examines the power dynamics of the northwest Sichuan mountain society from the perspective of the highland indigenous leaders. I investigate how and why various lords of the mountain regimes understood inter- and intra-community relationships in the local society and how the introduction of Ming political-diplomatic norms created new changes for the power structure in the mountains. In other words, this chapter adopts an local history perspective to scrutinize how the highland lords themselves understood the mountain society and their relations with the outside world.

Power Structure of the Mountain Society

In this chapter, I will explore the indigenous vision of the highland through the lens of two local regimes: Dongbuhanhu (董卜韓胡) and Zagu (雜谷), with the former as the protagonist. In late imperial Chinese sources, regimes like Dongbuhanhu and Zagu are usually deemed as *tusi* (土司), which could be literally translated as local office, because of their indigeneity and semi-autonomy within the administrative system of different Chinese dynasties. In the contemporary Chinese government's *minzu* discourse, such historical political entities in northwest Sichuan A'ba and Ganze Tibetan Autonomous Prefectures (阿壩&甘孜藏族自治州) are mostly

[103] Luciano, "Yuan Organization of the Tibetan Border Areas," 374.

identified as small chiefdoms of Gyalrong Tibetan (嘉絨藏族), a Tibetan subgroup living in the eastern Kham region. However, this label has been constantly denied and challenged by the locals who instead claim themselves to be an independent ethnic group of Gyalrong people. In the mid-15th century, both regimes attracted much attention from the Ming dynasty. But that does not mean their early histories were unknown. One local gazetteer of Yanzhou (雅州), modern-day Ya'an county (雅安), documents a brief but informative record. It reads:

> Dongbuhanhu used to be a subordinate of Jinchuan (金川). During the Yuan dynasty, Leduo (勒朵, most likely the leader of Dongbuhanhu at the time) paid tribute on behave of Jinchuan to the Yuan court. Completing the mission, Leduo returned with a seal specifically for Dongbuhanhu. Taking the bestowal of the seal as a recognition from the Yuan court, Dongbuhanhu broke away from Jinchuan, annexed six hamlets, and became a tributary of the Yuan on its own.[104]

This brief line on Dongbuhanhu points to three characteristics of the power dynamics of the mountain society: hierarchical structure, political alliance, and external source of legitimacy. These three traits, respectively, correspond to the intra-regime relationship and inter-regime relationship in the mountain society and the relationship between mountain society and the outside world. The record indicates that during the Yuan era, Dongbuhanhu had its own intra-community hierarchy with Leduo being the de facto leader. Meanwhile, it was a political ally of Jinchuan, yet the alliance soon broke down as Dongbuhanhu managed to acquire supports from stronger external political forces. These three traits of political order were quite important as they determined the power dynamics in the mountain society before the Ming's large-scale penetration and the ensuing reshuffling of regional geopolitics in the 16th century. This section will characterize these three traits briefly, and the

[104] Cao and Cao, *Qianlong Yazhou Fuzhi*, 246.

following sections will use the rise of Dongbuhanhu and its interactions with Zagu as further illustrations.

Hierarchical structure:

One of the easiest ways to characterize the political structure of the mountain regimes is to separate their members into two groups: the rulers and the ruled. The ruler was the head of the ruling class. In the highland society, most regime rulers ascended to their positions through military merits or with religious sacredness, and their authority was hereditary within a particular lineage. Although most mountain regimes followed the patriarchal rule, primogeniture was not always the case. Instead, it was quite popular that secular and religious authority were equally distributed between two brothers, and whether the elder inherited secular or religious power varied regime by regime. In addition to the ruling house, there were also a number of households whose leaders were generals, clergy, or advisors to the ruler of the regime. These military, civil, and religious aristocrats, together with the ruling house, constituted the ruling class of the regimes.

Despite having a recognized ruler, most mountain regimes were not autocratic. Instead, the power structure was quite de-centralized in these communities. This, I argue, largely resulted from the region's topographical condition. The ragged terrain of the highland considerably limited the scale of local settlements. While some indigenes dwelled in the intermountain basins, many local settlements were on the hill slopes, and even those relatively larger ones boasted only several hundreds of households. Because many settlements were scattered across a wide array of mountain ranges, making communication and transportation quite difficult, a regime ruler had to rely on noble underlings to govern on his behalf. Fiefs were thus granted, and vassals within the regime gradually took shape. In certain scenarios, strong

vassals were also able to challenge the authority of the ruler when the latter became weak. This power dynamics constituted a quasi-feudal system of hierarchical, but not autocratic, mountain regimes. Such a structure allowed space for political re-organization, especially when trans-regime political alliances were quite prevalent in the region.

Political alliance:

As topography considerably shaped intra-regime relationships, it also affected how relationships between different regimes and communities were adjusted in the mountain society. The ways in which terrain molds settlements has been quite consistent throughout history. 7th century Chinese sources indicate that the region was of remote mountain and deep valley, and there was no supreme leader.[105] One 18th century observer also commented on the correlation between settlements and mountain topography, writing that "the land is divided and guarded respectively as if such separations are heaven's mandate to keep the locals from annexing each other."[106] In this scenario, forming political alliances with other regimes or communities was a political norm. But what makes political alliance in northwest Sichuan quite peculiar was its binary character. In other words, the local regimes tended to side with one group or another when it came to transregional competition, and common binary grouping categories include Big-surname and Small-surname（大姓-小姓）, Ox-tail and Sheep-tail（牛尾巴-羊尾巴）, and Black and White (黑-白). Such dichotomic categories, according to Wang Mingke, resulted from the intense interpersonal relations in a resource-scarce society in which segmentary opposition was a basic social norm. People tended to imagine common ground with one another,

[105] Wei, *Sui Shu*,352.
[106] Fanglueguan, *Pingding Liang Jinchuan Fanglue*,1415.

most often shared ancestry, in order to strengthen a sense of belonging and separate self-groups from other-groups.[107] During the Ming dynasty, mountain regimes frequently clashed with one another, and the binary principle was an important consideration when they sought allies. Some scholars referred to such imagined communities in the 15th century northwest Sichuan as groups of clan-surname (族姓 *zuxing*);[108] this dissertation will interpret them as 'proto-clans.'

Although they functioned as important references for social grouping, binary taxonomies were not always the only decisive principle in alliance-making. Under certain circumstances, the binary norm could be outweighed by other factors, such as religious concerns, personal ambitions, or money. It was usually the emergence of powerful external threats which prompted the formation of mountain confederations that transcended the dichotomic social distinction. When Tibetan Buddhist forces began to spread and develop in the mountain society, the trans-regional Bön alliance took shape, and when the Ming dispatched its huge army to the mountain, the Big-surname and Small-surname communities first cooperated to fight off the encroaching enemy. Attracted by material wealth or summoned by ambitious leaders, different proto-clans were also able to form temporary coalitions. The entanglement of all these social mechanisms constituted the fundamental, yet sophisticated political landscape of the mountain society.

External source of legitimacy:

The mountain society was never completely isolated. The constant interactions between the mountain society and the outside world, in this case the Chinese dynasties, would further complicate the power structures mentioned above. As part of

[107] Wang, *Qiang Zai Hanzang Zhijian*, 62.
[108] Zou, "Mingdai Qianqi Chuanxibei Zuxing Bianzheng Yu Zongjiao Guanxi."

the Chinese-Tibetan borderland, the mountain society sat at the outmost reaches of both the Chinese and the Tibetan cultural-political realms. Such a geopolitical position allowed the mountain society to interact with the outside in a much more flexible and even creative manner. Elsewhere I have published an article on Muli, a small kingdom in south Sichuan mountain, which illustrates how such borderland regimes used the geopolitical struggle between the Chinese, Mongols, Tibetans and Yunnanese in the late 16th and 17th century to its own advantage.[109] It is exactly in such interactions with external, oftentimes stronger, political powers that we can see clearly the agency of mountain regimes.

The impact of the Chinese dynasties on the mountain society was two-fold. On the one hand, it had the potential to consolidate the mountain society's hierarchical relationship because the sanction from external political powers would strengthen regime rulers' authority within the community. On the other hand, just as the Dongbuhanhu-Jinchuan case indicates, support from the outside world could provide a shortcut for petty mountain regimes to gain power and thus disturb the presumed hierarchical order. The way that external political powers influenced the binary social structure was quite similar. Sometimes the Ming dynasty would strive to maintain the balance between the two proto-clan groups so that they would each check the development of the other; but in other scenarios, the binary proto-clans would choose to cooperate first in the face of external threats before they resumed their rivalry. Needless to say, all these dynamic modes of interaction were contingent, and their impact on the mountain society has to be analyzed case by case.

[109] Hu, "Ruling the Land of the Yellow Lama: Religion, Muli, and Geopolitics in the 17th Century Sino-Tibetan Borderland."

This introductory section has identified three characteristics fundamental to the power structure of the mountain society. As these three factors frequently intermingled and their relationship was quite resilient, exactly how they strengthened and undermined each other or contributed to the mountain society's power dynamics is subject to specific contexts. The following sections will identity the power structure of Dongbuhanhu, how it rose to power in competition with Zagu based on the binary theory, and how its empire-building enterprise created a frontier crisis for Ming China at one of the dynasty's weakest points.

The Mountain Regime and its Political Structure

The rise of Dongbuhanhu was probably the most urgent frontier crisis that Ming China faced on its western side in the 15th century. However, Dongbuhanhu was not a regime with intrinsic geographical and geopolitical advantage. Quite removed from major overland and water transportation and hemmed in by various neighboring polities (Fig. 3.1), Dongbuhanhu did not demonstrate much potential as a major threat to the Ming if one considers its geographical and geopolitical conditions. The relative isolation of the regime probably explains why the pre-Ming history of Dongbuhanhu largely remains obscure: its outside contact was severely limited.[110]

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[110] From late Ming to the early 20th century, scholars have proposed many possibilities for the origin of Dongbuhanhu's ruling house. Cao Xuequan, a late Ming scholar-official, claims that Dongbuhanhu should be the descendent of Meng Huo (孟獲) from the three kingdoms era in the 3rd century. Ren Naiqiang argues that Dongbuhanhu's ancestors were Qingyi Qiang (青衣羌) of Han dynasty. Ma Changshou suggests that Dongbuhanhu should have derived from Tibetans who marched eastward during the 10th century. See Cao, *Shuzhong guangji*, 416. Ren, *Sichuan Shanggushi Chutan*, 167; Ma Changshou, "Jiaring minzu shehui shi" in Zhou, *Ma Changshou Minzu Xue Lunji*, 140-153; Even the meaning of Dongbuhanhu lacks clarification. One popular explanation is that Dongbuhanhu is actually he combination of four surnames, Dong, Bu, Han, Hu. See Baoxing xian wenwu guanli suo, "Dongbuhanhu Xuanweisi Shixi Kao," in *Baoxing wenshi ziliao*, 27. But this explanation lacks support from historical materials and thus ungrounded. Neither could the Tibetan spelling of Dongbuhanhu provide much useful information. Donghuhanbu is recorded as stong sde nam mkha' in Tibetan. While stong sde means "the general who commands one thousand soldiers", nam mkha' means sky or heaven. Yet the pronunciation of this Tibetan phrase is not close to "Dong-bu-han-hu" at all. Therefore, it must be a later Tibetanization that explains Dongbuhanhu as "the heavenly general who commands one thousand soldiers." I would like to thank Prof. Christopher Atwood for pointing out that the first two characters, Dongbu, is most likely an abbreviation of stong-bu-chung, which means petty chiliarch (小千户), and it was a Yuan-granted official title. This title, I argue, is highly possible granted to Leduo, the one who went to Beijing to pay tribute on behalf of Jinchuan. But in comparison to Donghu, the meaning of Hanhu is less clear. Local knowledge indicates that it is an

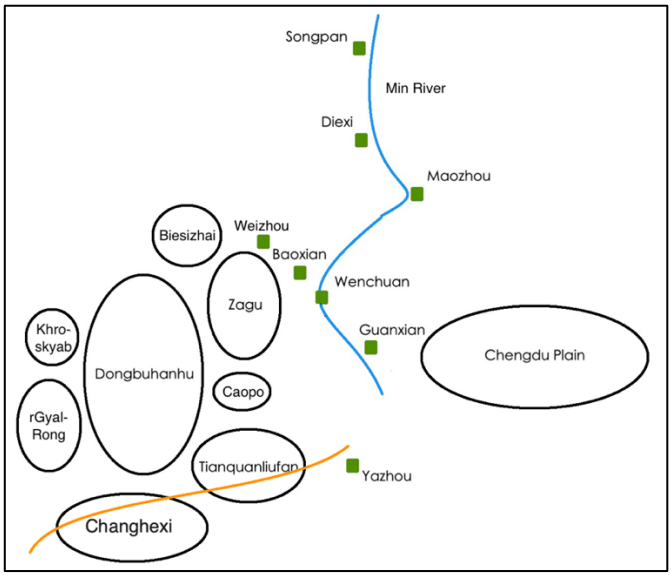

Fig. 3.1: Dongbuhanhu hemmed in by multiple regional regimes, detached from major water and land routes that were guarded by Ming military garrisons (green squares)

Topography was another factor which contributed to Dongbuhanhu's strategic disadvantage and impeded the region's economic development. Landlocked in the deep mountains of northwest Sichuan, different Dongbuhanhu communities were most likely practicing "vertical trade," a term coined by Wim Van Spengen to describe a barter form of transaction between animal products of the plateau-dwelling nomads and agricultural products of the sedentary residents.[111] In comparison with inter-community exchanges that was relatively self-sufficient, non-local raw materials and goods had to be imported from places beyond the mountain ranges. But the sustainability of such supplies relied on one condition: functional routes. However, routes in mountainous northwest Sichuan were quite vulnerable. Mountain trails were not only few, but could also be easily blocked by either natural environmental causes such as storm, earthquake and landslide, or human factors like robbery.

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indigenous term for "vast space that thousands of people dwell." But without further support from historical materials, the meaning of Hanhu remained unclear. For this local knowledge, see http://www.baoxing.gov.cn/xinwen/show/e6c13f25-ec08-4f94-a410-c158e8a7a121.html. Access time: 05/25/2020.

[111] Spenger, *Tibetan Border Worlds: A Geo-Historical Analysis of Trade and Traders*, 99.

In fact, Dongbuhanhu's very first appearance in Ming texts simply mentions a road blockage incident. In 1411, an armed conflict broke out between Ronglongmeng (容隆蒙) and Diaomen (碉門), two neighboring regimes to the south of Dongbuhanhu.[112] Their struggle blocked Dongbuhanhu's access to the Sichuan-Tibet route, which had been the major transportation route through the western Sichuan mountains and connecting Sichuan to Tibet since the Mongol era.[113] Losing this passageway and access to the region's most important trading network undoubtedly worried Dongbuhanhu's leader, Namkha (南科/喃葛), who appealed to the Ming's military intervention to solve the road-blocking issue for him.

It is likely unsurprising to modern readers that the Ming emperor did not act on Dongbuhanhu's request. After all, mounting a military expedition to clear the route for a mountain regime located on the empire's westmost frontier was of little interest to the Ming. But at the same time, I argue it is exactly such geographical and, in particular, political remoteness which would do Dongbuhanhu a favor: the regime was not under the close watch of the Ming, and it enjoyed more space to act on its own.

A comparison of Dongbuhanhu with other local regimes such as Zagu and Longzhou in terms of the ranks and tiles they received from the Ming speaks to how Dongbuhanhu's distance from the Ming territory and imperial apparatus was advantageous for its development. When the Ming army firstly marched into the northwest Sichuan mountains in 1374, the ruler of the Longzhou regime was bestowed a 3B rank of Grand pacification commissioner (宣慰使).[114] This was quite a

[112] *Ming Taizong shilu*, juan 115, the 9th year, month IV, yiyou.
[113] Sperling, "The Szechwan-Tibet Frontier in the Fifteenth Century."
[114] *Ming Taizu shilu*, juan 70, the 7th year, month IV, wuxu.

high-ranking official title, as during the Yuan dynasty the entire northwest Sichuan region was merely a 3A administrative unit, and Longzhou was just one among several local regimes.[115] Considering the fact that Longzhou was one of the first local regimes to submit to the Ming, it is clear that the bestowal of the high rank was a political gesture to reward its quick submission. Therefore, as the Ming gradually gained control over the region with its settled military, the regime was downgraded to a 5B unit.[116] Although the Longzhou leader requested to reclaim the 3A rank in 1427, the petition was rejected.[117] Other regimes such as Zagu, due to their proximity to Ming's territory and closer supervision by the Ming military, were designated as 5B administrative units as well.[118]

In contrast, Dongbuhanhu was able to acquire and, most importantly, keep a high-ranking title because of its distance from the Ming's imperial apparatus. When a Dongbuhanhu envoy reported to the Ming court on the road blockage issue in 1411, Namkha was still addressed as a local headman (地面頭目).[119] But four years later in 1415, Namkha was granted the 3B title of Grand pacification commissioner.[120] This assignment should have been a case quite similar to that of Longzhou in which an early-submitted regime was granted complimentary high position. But the difference is that Dongbuhanhu's title was not later downgraded. This is most likely because Dongbuhanhu was quite far away from the Ming's substantial sphere of influence, and from the Ming's perspective, a high-ranking title would work as a reminder to Dongbuhanhu of the privilege and trust it gained from the Ming, as well as its responsibility to maintain peace in the region for the heavenly kingdom.

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[115] Zhang, *Yuandai Tubo Difang Xingzheng Tizhi Yanjiu*, 210.
[116] *Ming Taizu shilu*, juan 134, the 14th year, month I, yiwei.
[117] *Ming Xuanzong shilu*, juan 31, the 2th year, month IX, bingwu.
[118] *Ming Taizong shilu*, juan 65, the 5th year, month III, yisi.
[119] *Ming Taizong shilu*, juan 115, the 9th year, month IV, yiyou.
[120] *Ming Taizong shilu*, juan 165, the 13th year, month VI, xinmao.

While bestowing various types of titles to mountain regimes supported the Ming's constructed world order in which its peripheral regions were guarded by loyal non-Han vassals, such endorsements meant something different for Dongbuhanhu. From a mountain regime's perspective, a prestige title from the Ming indicated one's political and strategic weight.[121] The higher the title from the Ming, the more important and powerful the regime should be. According to this reasoning, once mountain regimes acquired high ranking titles from the Ming, they were justified to intervene in territorial and jurisdictional disputes between inferior title bearers or exert influence in other regimes' domestic politics. Peter Schwieger has pointed out that the imperial titles and seals from the Chinese played a crucial role in the legitimization of political authority in 15th century central Tibet, and "perhaps the Tibetan headmen were even more eager to ask for imperial seals than that the emperor was interested in granting them."[122] These symbols of recognition from external powers most likely functioned in a similar manner in northwest Sichuan and to some degree laid the very foundation for Dongbuhanhu's later development in the mid-15th century.

In addition to geographical, topographical, and geopolitical conditions, it is also important to examine the political configuration of the regime: this provides essential knowledge for understanding the power dynamics in the mountain society when Dongbuhanhu's rise threated neighboring regimes. A standard mountain society political structure existed in Dongbuhanhu, as introduced in the previous section, in which the ruler acquired legitimacy through both military and religious approaches, was backed up by external powers, employed a hereditary system for authority succession, and relied on elite underlings for quasi-feudal governance.

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[121] *Ming Xuanzong shilu*, juan 31, the 2th year, month IX, bingwu.
[122] Schwieger, "Significance of Ming Titles Conferred upon the Phag Mo Gru Rulers: A Reevaluation of Chinese-Tibetan Relations during the Ming Dynasty," 326.

Let us first look at how Dongbuhanhu perceived secular and religious legitimacy in rulership. In 1415, when Namkha received the 3B title from the Ming, he also managed to have the Ming recognize his religious authority by sanctioning the establishment of a Prefectural Daoist Registry (道紀司),[123] the supreme office for all Daoist-related affairs in the region. One must note that in the context of 15th century northwest Sichuan, the terms 'Daoism' and 'Daoist' did not refer to the Chinese-origin indigenous philosophical tradition and its practitioners, but the Bön religion (苯教). Though I will examine the prevalence of Bön in the region in detail later on, here it is more important to know that Bön functioned as a religious pillar of Dongbuhanhu's rulership, and it was also recognized by external powers.

Both secular and religious authority provided legitimacy for Dongbuhanhu rulership, with the latter likely predominant. This is partially revealed by how the Dongbuhanhu ruler distributed power among his sons. In 1430, before his retirement, Namkha sent one of his sons, a Bön practitioner, to the Ming court. The so-called Bönpo Lama delivered Namhka's wishes for the Ming's sanction to allow his elder son, Panden Yeshe (班丹也失), to take charge of the religious population within Dongbuhanhu and his second son, Gelek Gyaltsen (克羅俄監粲), to rule the subjects in a civil capacity.[124] As the Ming granted him these permissions, we see that in many other highland regimes, such as Zhuoni in southern Gansu, it was always the elder son inherited secular authority and the younger one the religious,[125] the opposite happened in Dongbuhanhu. While it is not sufficient to argue that religious authority was more important to Dongbuhanhu rulership simply from the fact that it fell into the elder

[123] *Ming Taizong shilu*, juan 165, the 13th year, month VI, xinmao.
[124] *Ming Xuanzong shilu*, juan 71, the 5th year, month X, yisi.
[125] Yang, *Zhuoni Yangtusi Zhuanlue*.

son's hands and secular authority to those of the younger, the significant role of religion to Dongbuhanhu regime was already evident.

Another feature of local political structure was the hierarchical relationship in which dominating regimes enjoyed lordship and subordinating regimes were vassals. This may be seen in both Dongbuhanhu and Zagu's administrative organization. In the initial stage of Dongbuhanhu's rise, Biesizhai (別思寨) was probably one among few vassal regimes under its governance. According to Map 2.1, we see that Biesizhai was a region to the northeast of Dongbuhanhu and functioned as a buffer zone between Dongbuhanhu and Zagu. Therefore, it was a distant but strategically important region for Dongbuhanhu. The fact that Namkha assigned Wu're Duoerzhijian (兀惹朵兒只監), probably a military commander, to rule the region on his behalf indicated the quasi-feudal principle in the mountain society. But by that time, this Biesizhai community was not recognized in the Ming's administrative system because it was only a later request made by Wu're Duoerzhijian's son, an action that led to severe punishments and caused his death.[126] Such a situation rendered both Wu're Duoerzhijian and his son as headmen (頭人) of Dongbuhanhu, a status that an early 20th century scholar summarized as "hereditary, but only refers to those who rule a small territory and do not process ranks and titles from imperial courts."[127]

Such a lord-headmen hierarchy also existed between Zagu and Dasiman (達思蠻). Zagu was a regime to the east of Dongbuhanhu. It took shape during the time of A'piao (阿漂), a petty hamlet head who gradually rose to power and recognition in

[126] *Ming Yingzong shilu*, juan 132, the 10th year, month VIII, renyin.
[127] Chen, "Sichuan Lixian Zangzu Tusi Zhidu Xia de Shehui,"365.

local society in the late 14th century.[128] In his initial expansion, A'piao was assisted by a military commander, Yan Tai, who was another hamlet head. After several decades wherein A'piao became the *de facto* leader of Zagu regime, Yan Tai was named the headmen of Dasiman, a vassal under Zagu's rule.[129] Therefore, similar to Dongbuhanhu, Zagu also implemented hierarchical governance. Moreover, it relied heavily upon religion for local control as well. It was said that there were countless monasteries within the domain of Zagu,[130] and the vice commander of Dasiman was also a religious specialist.[131] Zou Libo speculates that Bön was the dominating religion in Dongbuhanhu, and Zagu was a Tibetan Buddhist patron.[132] But I argue that Zagu, similar to Dongbuhanhu, was also a pro-Bön regime. One of my strongest pieces of evidence is that Jinchuan, a stronghold of Bön, was one of Zagu's vassals.[133] Jinchuan's Bön tradition was so persistent that even during the Jinchuan wars in the 18th century, it was still the foremost Bön enemy in the eyes of the Qing empire. Although in the 1440s Jinchuan submitted to Dongbuhanhu and migrated to Dongbuhanhu territory, a case we will examine later, this nevertheless points to the fact that Zagu was heavily influenced by Bön in the early 15th century.

The Rise of a Bön Patron

As Dongbuhanhu and Zagu shared many common elements in their political structure and religious characteristics, they both began their first round of expansion in the name of Bön. Bön is an indigenous Tibetan religion. Yet its early history is quite obscure. While many believed that its initial development predates the introduction of Buddhism from India, others claim that the religion did not start to

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[128] Yuan, *Quanshu Bianyu Kao*, vol. 4, 95.
[129] Yuan, *Quanshu Bianyu Kao*, vol. 4, 96.
[130] Yuan, *Quanshu Bianyu Kao*, vol. 4, 96.
[131] *Ming Taizong shilu*, juan 65, the 5th year, month III, yisi.
[132] Zou, *Mingqing Jiarong Zangzu Tusi Guanxi Yanjiu,* 126.
[133] Yuan, *Quanshu Bianyu Kao*, vol. 4, 96.

take shape until the 11th century.[134] Many scholars became acquainted with Bön by studying its clash with Tibetan Buddhist believers in 18th century northwest Sichuan during the Jinchuan wars.[135] But in the early 15th century, Bön was already quite prevalent in the eastern Tibetan region, especially in modern-day northwest Sichuan.[136] Although modern Tibetologists have documented some victories in which Tibetan Buddhists successfully defeated Bön competitors in the early 15th century,[137] in general, Bön forces enjoyed much more popularity at the time. Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in the region had to adopt many Bön religious elements in their interior and exterior decorations,[138] and even the author of *mDo smad chos 'byung*, the most authentic chronicle of Tibetan Buddhism in eastern Tibet, recognized the region as a spiritual realm of Bön.[139]

It is worth noting that in 15th century northwest Sichuan, while Bön is written in its transliterated form *Benbu* (奔卜) in Ming court records, in contemporary Tibetan materials as compiled by Zou Libo, *bon* (Bön) is used to translate the Chinese terms *Daojiao* (道教, Daoism) or *Daoshi* (道士, Daoist).[140] Such a mistranslation points to the intriguing fact that when inhabitants in the mountain society imagined the relationship between *Fo* and *Dao* (佛道 Chan Buddhism and Daoism) in the Chinese heartland, the most suitable comparative reference they had in mind was the pair of Tibetan Buddhism and Bön, as the former one shared much common elements with

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[134] Schaik, *Tibet: A History*, 99.
[135] On the religious aspects of the Jinchuan wars, see Martin, "Bonpo Canons and Jesuit Canons: On Sectarian Factors Involved in the Chien-Lung Emperor's Second Goldstream Expeditions of 1771-1776." Waley-Cohen, "Religion, War and Empire-Building in Eightteenth-Century China." While Qing sources indicate that during the Jinchuan war, Bön masters used magic power to impede the Qing army and the Qing's Tibetan Buddhist specialists, Prof. Christopher Atwood from University of Pennsylvania, during an informal discussion, claims that Tibetan Buddhists were more of the ex post facto carpet baggers than the actual target of the Bönpos.
[136] Karmay, *Feast of the Morning Light: The Eighteenth Century Wood-Engravings of Shenrab's Life-Stories and the Bon Canon from Gyalrong*, 2.
[137] Sperling, "Tibetan Buddhism, Perceived and Imagined, along the Ming-Era Sino-Tibetan Frontier," 160-161. Although the story itself can be biased as it was written by the Jonangpa winners.
[138] Zou, *Mingqing Jiarong Zangzu Tusi Guanxi Yanjiu*, 105-106.
[139] Zhiguanba Gongquehu danba raoji, *Anduo Zhengjiaoshi*, 726.
[140] Zou, "Mingdai Qianqi Chuanxibei Zuxing Bianzheng Yu Zongjiao Guanxi,"15-16.

Chan Buddhism and the latter was much more indigenous. Therefore, Chinese texts produced in the northwest Sichuan context, especially those translated from Tibetan materials or transcribed from indigenous oral collections, adopted *Daojiao* or *Daoshi* to describe Bön and its clerics.

Fig 3.2: Bön lama with protruding tongue holding trumpet, dagger, and bell and drum, chopper, and hair of 100 dead and 100 living people in a state of trance.[141]

Since Bön prevailed in the mountain society, acquiring Bön support and the ensuing religious legitimacy, to many local regimes, became a favorable approach to consolidating power and authority. Such patronage of Bön, if not for religious reasons, stemmed from the expectation of a rich return on investment: an identity as a Bön patron made it easier to attract followers that could be potentially converted into soldiers and accumulate wealth from religious donations. Dongbuhanhu was just one among many regimes that understood this logic well and acted resolutely, and its first

[141] Photo credited to Joseph Rock, dated July 11, 1926. JOSEPH ROCK: TRAVELS THROUGH CHINA, http://id.lib.harvard.edu/images/olvwork124423/catalog

step was to annex Gyalrong, the most sacred Bön realm in the entire eastern Tibetan region.[142]

The Gyalrong region's religious significance derived primarily from Mt. Murdo, a sacred mountain in Bön cosmology located in the center of Gyalrong.[143] Although large-scale cultural construction of Mt. Murdo's sacredness primarily took place in the 18th century when abundant religious texts and pilgrimage guidebooks were produced,[144] it was already a well-known religious landscape in the 15th century. Even Tibetan Buddhists acknowledged its divine significance. According to the hagiography of a 15th century Sakya sect Tibetan Buddhist, Mt. Murdo was a sacred mountain where deities and evil spirits (lha gnyan) existed.[145] It is not an exaggeration to say that, in 15th century northwest Sichuan, whoever controlled Gyalrong and laid a hand on Mt. Murdo would have his reputation spread among the Bön communities.

Although we are not crystal clear about how exactly Dongbuhanhu brought Gyalrong to submit, whether through military actions or political-religious ruses, the whole process is, as Roger Greatrex convincingly points out, revealed through the changing bearer of a specific religious title.[146] In 1425, one Gyalrong Bön master, Dorje Gyaltsen (朵兒只監藏), went to the Ming court and received the title of State Preceptor of Sublime Wisdom and Supernormal Awakening (妙智通悟國師).[147] In 1427 and 1429, he sent a so-called *Wenbu* (溫卜) Sakya Gyaltsen (釋夏監藏) to Beijing twice.[148] While Greatrex identifies Sakya Gyaltsen as Dorje Gyaltsen's bursar,

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[142] Although rGyal-Rong (Gyalrong) is commonly used to refer to a vast region in eastern Kham/western Sichuan, in the Ming dynasty, it was still a designation with narrow reference that points to a specific political entity.Zou, "Mingqing Shiqi Jiarong Zangqu de Diyu Gainian Jiqi Yanbian Chutan."
[143] Epstein and Peng, "Ganja and Murdo: The Social Construction of Space at Two Pilgrimage Sites in Eastern Tibet."
[144] Karmay, "The Cult of Mount Murdo in Gyalrong."
[145] Maoergai sangmudan, "Zangzu Shi Qile Mingjing," 386.
[146] Greatrex, "Tribute Missions from the Sichuan Borderlands to the Imperial Court,"90-91.
[147] *Ming renzong shilu*, juan 13, the 1th year, month III, xinmao.
[148] *Ming xuanzong shilu*, juan 28, the 2th year, month VI, yichou; juan 55, the 4th year, month VI, yimao.

I argue that the word *Wenbu* (溫卜) used in Ming texts as the prefix for Sakya Gyaltsen actually denotes Sakya Gyaltsen's identity as Dorje Gyaltsen's potential successor. This is because *Wenbu* (溫卜), similar to *Wanbu* (完卜), is the transliteration of Tibetan word *dbon po*, which refers to the nephew of nobles or religious masters.[149] Choosing one's own nephew as one's religious successor was a rather common practice among Tibetan religious specialists at the time, and they indeed always sent their nephew-successors to Beijing to foster a relationship with the Chinese patron before the nephews' formal succession. Yet as Ren Xiaobo claims that *dbon po* and the uncle-nephew principle were mainly used by Tibetan Buddhists,[150] here the case of Gyalrong indicates that the term and practice were also adopted by Bön masters.

Dorje Gyaltsen must have passed away in the early 1430s, because when Sakya Gyaltsen's own nephew showed up at the Ming court in 1434, Sakya Gyaltsen was already addressed as the State Preceptor.[151] However, when Sakya Gyaltsen's name emerges again in Ming court records five years later in 1439, he was described not as the State Preceptor, but as the disciple of the demised State Preceptor Dorje Gyaltsen.[152] It seems that he had already lost the title, which is exactly the case. Because another Ming court record indicates that one year prior, in 1438, the title of State Preceptor of Sublime Wisdom and Supernormal Awakening was given to Panden Yeshe, the religious leader of Dongbuhanhu.[153] In other words, by the late 1430s, Dongbuhanhu had already taken away the privileged title of the Gyalrong Bön leader, indicating its annexation of the Bön sacred realm. Although Sakya Gyaltsen

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[149] Actually, in another *Ming shilu* entry, Sakya Gyaltsen was just described as *wanbu* 完卜, indicating that the Ming texts use these two words interchangeably. *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 55, the 4th year, month V, yimao.
[150] Ren, "Cong Liangjian Laiwen Kan Ming Feng Dacheng Fawang Chuansi de Zhuanyi."
[151] *Ming xuanzong shilu*, juan 112, the 9th year, month VIII, yisi.
[152] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 54, the 4th year, month IV, yiyou.
[153] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 38, the 3th year, month I, dingyou.

filed a complaint with the Ming court and requested to resume the title, he only received denial.[154]

Once grasping religious authority in hand by having Gyalrong under its control, Dongbuhanhu's further religious expansion became quite smooth: it mounted religious warfare against multiple communities that followed Tibetan Buddhism in 1440,[155] subordinated the Bön-supporting regime in Khro-skyab to Gyalrong's northwest in 1444,[156] and in this process encroached on a new territory of considerable size and boosted power and authority in the mountain society. However, such an expansion strategy that combines military and religious approaches was not unique to Dongbuhanhu. Zagu was rising in the same manner. In 1431, the Zagu ruler murdered the head of a neighboring regime and forcefully occupied its territory;[157] in 1432, it invaded another several hamlets in significant strategic locations;[158] in 1441, Zagu dispatched a Bön master to lobby in four hamlets and successfully gained their submission.[159] The mountain society witnessed the rise and expansion of two powerful regimes in the 1430s, and hence an eventual clash between the two was unsurprising.

Competition in a Binary World

As both Dongbuhanhu and Zagu were expanding in the 1430s, a conflict between the two seemed inevitable. This section charts their competition in the 1440s northwest Sichuan and highlights how the local binary social structure played a role in this power dynamic.

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[154] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 55, the 4th year, month V, yimao.
[155] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 70, the 5th year, month VIII, wuyin.
[156] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 122, the 9th year, month X, renzi.
[157] *Ming xuanzong shilu*, juan 82, the 6th year, month VIII, bingwu.
[158] Yu, *Yuqian Ji*, 144.
[159] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 76, the 6th year, month II, renwu.

The previous section explored how in the 15th century, Zagu was a 5B regime in the Ming's administrative system, and Dongbuhanhu held the rank of 3B. While the rulers of Dongbuhanhu might have perceived this difference as an objective reflection of their distinct political weight and geopolitical significance, from a researcher's perspective, it does not mean Zagu was weaker; rather, it was merely the effect of Zagu's proximity to the Ming military, as the Ming felt it unnecessary to use a high-ranking title to flatter the regime. Moreover, Zagu had one geopolitical advantage that Dongbuhanhu desperately desired: the control of major passageways that linked northwest Sichuan to the broader region.

Transportation routes in the mountainous area, as one can imagine, were limited and quite fixed in terms of passageway. Restricted by topographical conditions, movement in the northwest Sichuan mountains had to follow either river valleys or mountain trails, thus rendering certain ferries or mountain passes significant strategic spots. Sitting between Dongbuhanhu and the Ming territory, Zagu clearly understood how vital outbound access was to the development of Dongbuhanhu and took full advantage of its geographical and geopolitical position. In 1432, ignoring the Ming's constant warnings, Zagu occupied six hamlets in Bao county. This was a pivotal move to check Dongbuhanhu because the hamlets were located along an important mountain route on which Dongbuhanhu heavily relied to dispatch envoys to Beijing. Keeping the route under control, Zagu effectively blocked Dongbuhanhu's outbound contact.[160]

The competition between Dongbuhanhu and Zagu intensified in the 1440s as both regimes expanded. Routes remained at the center of their power struggle. In 1441, Zagu again chopped down numerous trees on a mountain trail in order to block

[160] Yu, *Yuqian Ji*, 144.

Dongbuhanhu envoys. Although the latter eventually made their way to the Ming's Sichuan office, Zagu successfully kept more than 200 horses in the mountain that Dongbuhanhu envoys were supposed to bring to Beijing as diplomatic gifts.[161] Despite promising to look into this conflict, the Ming obviously had not done much to resolve the situation because one year later in 1442, Dongbuhanhu was still in need of a functional route, and it was even forced to quell a local rebellion for the Ming in order to send the envoys to the other side of the mountain ranges.[162]

In the 1440s, the de facto ruler of Dongbuhanhu was the young and ambitious Gelek Gyaltsen, Namkha's second son. Faced with Zagu's blockade, Gelek Gyaltsen initially set his hopes in diplomatic channels. He wished to invite the Ming to mediate, just as his father did in 1411 when a route-blocking incident arose, but the result was similarly disappointing. In 1442, after crushing the rebellion for the Ming, Gelek Gyaltsen filed a report to request the opening of a new route since Zagu had cut off the old ones.[163] But from the Ming's viewpoint, the mountain passageway Dongbuhanhu asked for was of strategic importance,[164] and since envoys from Dongbuhanhu had made it to the court in 1441 and 1442 after all, there was no need for new routes.[165] As the road-opening request was denied, Dongbuhanhu's next diplomatic mission in 1443 was again unsurprisingly sabotaged by Zagu.[166]

Gelek Gyaltsen's failure to gain the Ming's support resulted from the different expectations of the two sides. For Gelek Gyaltsen, functional routes to the Ming realm function primarily not as a conduit to send envoys to Beijing to pay homage to the Ming emperor, but as an entrance to a trans-regional commercial network. Therefore,

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[161] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 81, the 6th year, month VII, yiyou.
[162] Yu, *Yuqian Ji*, 144.
[163] Yu, *Yuqian Ji*, 145.
[164] Yu, *Yuqian Ji*, 145.
[165] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 94, the 7th year, month VII, wuyin.
[166] Yu, *Yuqian Ji*, 145.

what Zagu blocked was not Gelek Gyaltsen's opportunity to be a loyal subject, but Dongbuhanhu's opportunity for wealth. However, what the Ming valued more was the political implication of the Dongbuhanhu envoys' arrival – that Dongbuhanbu submitted to the Ming's heavenly authority and dispatched envoys periodically to show its respect. As long as the envoys managed to get to Beijing, the Ming would not expend much effort to intervene in a clash in a distant frontier region. In this regard, both sides acted accordingly based on their understandings of the mutual relation. However, Gelek Gyaltsen overestimated Dongbuhanhu's political weight to the Ming.

When the Ming refused to substantially intervene against Zagu's unfriendly actions, Dongbuhanhu was left on its own to deal with their competitor. And Dongbuhanhu's strategy, in the 1440s, was to form a transregional anti-Zagu alliance based on the binary principle of the mountain society.

The major allies that Dongbuhanhu sided with were two Bön communities: one was Jinchuan, the other Shangba (商巴). As briefly mentioned earlier, Jinchuan was a vassal regime under Zagu's control in the early 15th century. It was at first located to the east of Zagu and well known as a Bön stronghold. In 1439, Bön practitioners from more than 800 hamlets complained to the Ming court that their routes were blocked by some raw barbarians. And the Jinchuan Bön master was most likely the leader of the group, as it was him who drafted the correspondence.[167] Similarly, Shangba was also a Bön center. Located to the south of Songpan, it was powerful enough that even the Ming hesitated to confront it directly. In a skirmish in 1440, the Ming military captured and jailed the Shangba religious leader who seemed to be calling for a raid

[167] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 52, the 4th year, month II, dingyou. According to Roger Greatrex, The Chinese term Chuchan in this source is the transliteration of the Tibetan word Chu-chien, Jinchuan's Tibetan designation. Greatrex, "Tribute Missions from the Sichuan Borderlands to the Imperial Court,"108.

on the Ming's grain caravan and a siege of a Ming fortress. These actions soon led to large-scale retaliation, as Bön followers occupied mountain passes, blocked routes, and razed many Ming fortresses and postal stations.[168] Despite the pressing requests of the local military officers to dispatch a sizeable army to tame the unrest, the Ming instead executed the top commander of the Songpan military and exiled the vice commander. In the meantime, the Shangba Bön leader was released and even given the tile of State Preceptor in appeasement.[169]

What seemed to exist between Dongbuhanhu, Jinchuan, and Shangba was a religious alliance. But was that the case? It should be noted that while Dongbuhanhu was well-known as a Bön patron, Zagu also maintained a supportive attitude toward the religion since Jinchuan was just one of its vassals. In this regard, why did Jinchuan and Shangba then side with Dongbuhanhu? The answer to this question lies in the binary proto-clan social structure in northwest Sichuan.

As briefly discussed in the introductory section above, the binary structure of the mountain society, according to some historical anthropologists, derived from the intense interpersonal relationships in a resource-scarce society. Such a social structure could have existed since the late 14th century. One late Ming author points out that when an early Ming general, Ding Yu（丁玉）, came to the region, he noticed the binary distinction that indigenes adopted to distinguish one from another. Some indigenes called themselves "Ox Hair" or "Ox Brain" (牛毛/牛脑), and others "Sheep Hair" or "Sheep Brain" (羊毛/羊脑). Probably finding these designations strange and ridiculous, Ding Yu renamed them "Big Surname" and "Small Surname"

[168] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 62, the 4th year, month XII, dingchou.
[169] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 66, the 5th year, month V, bingxu.

(大姓&小姓).[170] In another undated Ming dynasty source, they were also recorded as the "Big Clan" and "Small Clan" (大族&小族).[171]

The relations between these binary proto-clan groups were dynamic. In peace times, the dichotomic distinction seemed to play little role. Different proto-clans had their inhabitances interdigitated in the mountain.[172] They continued to intermarry,[173] and they even cooperated to fight common enemies from time to time.[174] But when tension erupted, even in skirmishes, the idea of binary distinction surfaced and hence became a decisive factor in ally-making. It was exactly in this context that Jinchuan and Shangba cliqued with Dongbuhanhu: not for religious reasons, but for their shared, even if primarily imagined, blood ties. It is recorded that Dongbuhanhu and Jinchuan were both Small Clan communities, while Zagu and Dasiman were both Big Clans.[175] This shared proto-clan background, I argue, was the primary reason that Jinchuan was expelled from its original settlement under Zagu to a location in Dongbuhanhu's territory.[176] In this case, even if Jinchuan was an important Bön center that could boost Zagu's religious authority, the proto-clan code came first when tensions were escalating.

A similar situation in which the proto-clan principle outweighed religious values was also seen in a clash involving Shangba. In 1441, when an interpreter was dispatched by the Ming court to northwest Sichuan to investigate the growing tension on the ground, he noticed that what was behind a seemingly religious clash between Shangba, a Bön community, and Liba, a Tibetan Buddhist community, was actually a

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[170] Yi, *Choubian yide*, 5.
[171] Cao, *Shuzhong guangji*, juan 31.
[172] Gu, *Tianxia Junguo Libingshu*, 133.
[173] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 122, the 9th year, month X, dingsi.
[174] Guo, *Weimao Bianfang Jishi*, juan 11, "kanding," 31a.
[175] Gu, *Tianxia Junguo Libingshu*, 133.
[176] Gu, *Tianxia Junguo Libingshu*, 132-133.

proto-clan power struggle in which Shangba was the Big Clan and Liba was the Small Clan. Therefore, in his report to the court, the interpreter suggested that the Ming intervene to settle the conflict by dividing the local communities according to their proto-clan background. This way, the interpreter claimed, would restore peace in the region.[177]

Reminded by the interpreter that proto-clan distinctions were a deeper layer of the social structure of northwest Sichuan, did the Ming act accordingly by striking a balance between the two proto-clan groups so as to use one to check another? The short answer is no. The Ming did not care much about the conflicts on the ground as long as it did not threaten the Ming's imperial integrity, and thus the court did not adopt any sophisticated strategy to solve frontier tension. Such an attitude is most typically illustrated in its response to the Dong Min-Wang Yong vendetta.

The blood feud between the Dong Min (董敏) and Wang Yong (王永) cliques lasted almost two decades in the mid-15th century, during which the several years from 1443 to 1447 witnessed the most intensified clash. Both Dong and Wang were members of influential households in the local society of northwest Sichuan. Although they were from Big and Small Clans respectively, the two households kept the peace and even maintained continued to intermarry for generations.[178] But since Dong Min was a proto-clan ally with Dongbuhanhu and Wang Yon was aligned with Zagu,[179] Dong Min and Wang Yong were also dragged into the chaos when the relationship between Dongbuhanhu and Zagu soured.

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[177] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 80, the 6th year, month VI, dingchou. The report has been nicely translated by Elliot Sperling, see Sperling, "Tibetan Buddhism, Perceived and Imagined, along the Ming-Era Sino-Tibetan Frontier."
[178] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 122, the 9th year, month X, dingsi.
[179] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 122, the 9th year, month X, dingsi.

In 1443, Dong Min was appointed by the Ming to be the chief of Baozi Pass (保子關), an important mountain transit point. His brother-in-law, Wang Yong, went to the celebration banquet to congratulate him on his promotion. But for some reason, the two began to fight after several rounds of drinking,[180] and the whole situation went out of control when Wang Yong murdered Dong Min's son in addition to more than twenty family members of Dong.[181] While Dong Min himself managed to escape and went into hiding in Guan county,[182] Wang Yong managed to get Dong Min's seal and usurped the coveted mountain pass chief position.[183]

Shortly after murdering the Dong family, Wang Yong planned the murder of a second mountain pass chief, the chief of Hanshui Pass (寒水關). In 1443, Wang Yong instigated Jiawu (加悟), the leader of the so-called Caopo hamlet (草坡寨), to mount an attack on Hanshui Pass and kill the mountain pass chief and more than 500 of his family members and underlings.[184] After the massacre, Jiawu himself rushed to Zagu and hid under the ruler's protection. These two bloodbaths were not random incidents: I argue that they were part of a well-planned vendetta carried out by the Big Clans—the Zagu, Wang Yong and Caopo clique—against Small Clan communities. Moreover, the mountain pass chiefs were not chosen as targets without reason. Their murders were part of a clear political agenda, as Zagu made every effort to control strategic transportation point in the mountain.

The Ming received reports of these violent outbursts soon after they happened. But once again, the Ming did not intervene to punish the perpetrators. Instead, the Ming

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[180] Guo, *Weimao Bianfang Jishi*, juan 11, "kanding," 32a.
[181] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 270, the 7th year of Jingtai, month IX, guiyou.
[182] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 125, the 10th year, month II, bingyin.
[183] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 107, the 8th year, month VIII, guiwei.
[184] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 99, the 7th year, month XII, renyin; *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 270, the 7th year of Jingtai, month IX, guiyou.

absolved both of the culprits only several months later. In 1443, Wang Yong was pardoned after he sent his nephew to Beijing to plea for mercy.[185] In 1444, Jiawu was also exonerated when the Zagu ruler went so far as to plead for him.[186] Quite ironically, it was Dong Min, the victim of the feud, that was reported as wanted by the Ming because he refused to let things go.[187] At last, Dong Min was hunted down by the Ming military in 1447.[188] Gelek Gyaltsen, sent a memorial to the Ming court to plead mercy for Dong Min, just as the Zagu ruler did for Jiawu. Yet it was turned down, and Dong Min was executed by the Ming later that year.[189]

The Dong Min–Wang Yong struggle is a great case for examining the role Ming China played in the power dynamics of the binary mountain society and the Chinese dynasty's perception of the region. First, what concerned the Ming the most was whether its suzerainty received sufficient respect: it cared a lot about its mighty heavenly lordship but showed little interest in acting as a fair judge. The way that Ming China settled Dong-Wang disputes was measured by how deep the mountain regime rulers bowed down: when Wang Yong and Jiawu pled guilty shortly after they committed the crime and sent envoys to Beijing to show their submissive obedience, the Ming acted the magnanimous overlord and soon pardoned them. But for Dong Min, the real victim who believed he did nothing wrong and refused to seek the Ming's forgiveness, the Ming accused him of disturbing the regional order and eventually had him executed. In other words, the Ming perceived those who dared to challenge its authority the dangerous troublemaker, while those who shed real blood

[185] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 109, the 8th year, month X, renwu.
[186] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 121, the 9th year, month IX, renyin.
[187] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 125, the 10th year, month II, bingyin.
[188] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 152, the 12th year, month IV, yiwei.
[189] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 157, the 12th year, month VIII, xinwei.

merely made forgivable mistakes. It held a condescending view toward dealing with mountain society affairs.

Relevant to the first feature, a second point one may argue about Ming's role in 1440s mountain society was its passive and indifferent stance. The Ming did not pool many resources, be it military, personal, or economic, to this western mountain frontier. As long as there was no critical social unrest, the Ming court was willing to compromise, even if it meant executing a few military officers or pardoning several murderers. While one might interpret this as meticulous calculation, I argue it was more of an aloof attitude that points to the Ming's carelessness toward the region. The Ming demonstrated little interest in penetrating the local society and thus made little use of the taxonomic information collected by the interpreter about the mountain society. Such an attitude, I argue, resulted from two reasons. On one hand, the exhausting war in 1420s northwest Sichuan had made it clear to the Ming court that ruling the mountain society was too costly to bear. Instead, a passive style of indirect rule was much more appealing. On the other hand, in the 1440s, the Ming court was busy with other frontier affairs, as both the Ming- Mongol trade in the north and the Luchuan wars in the southwest created huge political and economic burdens for the Ming. Therefore, the clash between two frontier figureheads and their cliques was of little importance from the Ming court's perspective.

In the 1440s proto-clan competition, the Zagu clique was undoubtedly the winner. This is clearly shown through diplomatic frequency: while there was only an average of 0.8 Dongbuhanhu emissaries traveling to Beijing each year in the 1440s, Zagu envoys presented at the Ming court four times just in 1447. The changing power balance in the Dongbuhanhu-Zagu competition even created fissures in the proto-clan alliance. As Zagu rose to power, the ruler of Biesizhai, as one of the oldest and

supposedly loyalist allies to Dongbuhanhu, began to have second thoughts. The Biesizhai ruler not only forged a seal and claimed himself to be the Grand pacification commissioner, the 3B rank which equaled to the Dongbuhanhu ruler, but also sided with Zagu and other Big Clan groups to attack Dongbuhanhu communities. This was seen as a direct challenge to the authority of Dongbuhanhu, the nominal leader of the Small Clan clique, and tremendously upset the Dongbuhanhu leader Gelek Gyaltsen. Through a series of tactics, Gelek Gyaltsen captured the Biesizhai ruler, found his fake seal, and gouged out his eyes.[190] The torture was certainly for punishing the Biesizhai ruler's betrayal, but should also be understood as an indication of Gelek Gyaltsen's fury related to Zagu's rise to power.

The Tributary System in the Mountains

As the underdog in the power struggle in the 1440s, Gelek Gyaltsen must have been furious about the situation. Therefore, when he was informed of the domestic strife in Zagu, Gelek Gyaltsen took radical but resolute moves. In 1447, the concubine of the ruler of Zagu, for some reason, poisoned her husband and son, resulting in the death of the Zagu ruler and his potential successor.[191] At the same time, the new Zagu regent was obviously not very good at ruling. He not only humiliated the leader of Dasiman and other important members of Zagu's ruling class, but also failed to stop them from leaving Zagu to submit to Dongbuhanhu.[192] Gelek Gyaltsen saw these geopolitical changes as great opportunities. He thought the greatly weakened Zagu could not check him anymore, and his joy is obvious in the memorial he sent to the Ming: "Now, we have prepared horses and local goods as tributary gifts and are about

[190] *Ming Yingzong shilu*, juan 132, the 10th year, month VIII, renyin.
[191] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 171, the 13th year, month X, yisi.
[192] Yu, *Yuqian Ji*, 145.

to set off. We will open a new route that traverses the Zagu mountain. Please have officials and our escorts wait on the other side of the mountain."[193]

In what sounds like a notification rather than a plea, Gelek Gyaltsen caught the Ming in a moment of weakness as the empire was mired in the Luchuan campaign.[194] Moreover, I argue that Gelek Gyaltsen did not report the domestic calamity of Zagu's ruling house for no reason: it points to a taboo that the Ming cared about in frontier society. Although the Ming maintained an indifferent attitude toward the power struggles in the mountain society, one thing that it did pay attention to was rulership succession. The Ming emperor perceived himself as the overlord of the mountain regimes and thus the only superior who could justify or nullify the legitimacy of mountain regime rulers. Therefore, when the Zagu ruler's concubine killed her husband and son, it not only directly challenged the Ming's hegemony over succession affairs, but also violated the Ming-promoted Confucius orthodoxy in which women should obey men. This on all accounts undermined the legitimacy of Zagu and also justified Dongbuhanhu's further anti-Zagu actions.

Gelek Gyaltsen's claim to open up a new route in the mountain, pointed out by a Ming official, was just a smokescreen for Dongbuhanhu's invasion of Zagu.[195] And indeed, Gelek Gyaltsen did invade Zagu. In 1448 and 1449, Dongbuhanhu mounted a series of attacks and successfully occupied a not insignificant amount of Zagu territory.[196] The Ming did not react in any substantial way because it was busy with the Ming-Mongol struggle and the ensuing succession crisis when the emperor was captured alive by the Mongols. But this does not necessarily mean that Zagu did not try to get the Ming involved. In fact, Zagu sent an envoy to bring important political

[193] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 171, the 13th year, month X, yisi.
[194] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 171, the 13th year, month X, yisi.
[195] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 171, the 13th year, month X, yisi.
[196] Yu, *Yuqian Ji*, 144.

messages to the Ming, but the court failed to address them. But before we dive into this diplomatic incident, it is important to first introduce how we should understand the so-called tributary system in the context of Ming-highland interactions.

The tributary system was a cosmological, ideological, and diplomatic framework that many Chinese dynasties employed when interacting with the outside world, and the Ming dynasty is often singled out as the model.[197] Power asymmetry forms the core of the system: it assumed China's top position in the inter-polity hierarchy, which other participants of the system had to acknowledge if they sought to establish trade and diplomatic relations with China. For the Ming, the system embodied the empire's superiority and hegemony, and Chinese historical materials always document it as the predominant framework that provided basic principles for the Ming's foreign communication.[198]

Research on the tributary system is abundant, and many scholars would agree that most historical materials we have reflect a China-centric view and thus can disguise certain aspects of the cross-regional contact. Peter Schweiger, in one of his recent papers, convincingly suggests that Tibetans never used the word *dpya*, which had been the Tibetan term for "tribute" (贡 gong), to describe their historical interactions with China, even though this narrative is commonly adopted in Ming and Qing court records.[199] This supports the argument that the Tibetans, and probably all participants of the tributary system, might have their own interpretations for the tributary interactions with China.

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[197] Wills, *Embassies and Illusions: Dutch and Portuguese Envoys to K'ang-Hsi, 1666-1687*, 14.
[198] Wills, *Embassies and Illusions*, 14.
[199] Schwieger, "Tibetan Hierarchs and the Qing emperor," in Jeannine Bischoff and Alice Travers eds., *Commerce and Communities: Social and Political Status and the Exchange of Goods in Tibetan Societies*, 37.

This section examines the so-called tributary interactions between the Ming and the northwest Sichuan mountain society from the perspective of material culture. Instead of court narratives, it pays more attention to the on-the-ground ramifications of the transregional diplomatic framework. In other words, it focuses on how mountain regime rulers and inhabitants perceived their interactions with the Ming, and what exactly the tributary system brought to the mountain society. Two cases will be analyzed in detail, the first one related to Zagu and the second to Dongbuhanhu.

In 1448, Zagu sent a monk called Nangezang (南哥藏) to Beijing. In Ming court records, Nangezang's arrival was documented as a tributary mission, and the materials he brought along with him—some swords and armors—were hence recorded as tributary gifts.[200] In Ming official records, formal diplomatic contacts such as tributary activities were always documented carefully, and tributary items—be it religious objects, horses, or local goods—were usually clearly laid out. In this regard, swords and armor were the only tribute gifts Nangezang presented to the Ming. Faced with such items from the mountain society, the Ming reception official commented that the swords and armor were of little value, and thus Nangezang was nothing but a petty swindler who sought to trade the Ming's rewards for some scrap metal. Therefore, the Ming officials reduced the return rewards and harshly criticized Nanggezang. This humiliation tremendously outraged Nangezang, who then refused to kneel down to accept the downgraded rewards.[201] Because of such a reaction, Nangezang was eventually thrown into jail for disgracing the Ming emperor. [202]

In Ming court records, nearly all foreigners from abroad were documented as tributary envoys, and their arrivals were perceived as gestures of subordination to the

[200] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 172, the 13th year, month XI, bingwu.
[201] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 172, the 13th year, month XI, bingwu.
[202] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 180, the 14th year, month VI, bingzi.

Ming's supremacy. In this regard, Nangezang seemed to be quite greedy and rude for offering inferior tributes and confronting the Ming court. This was exactly the message the Ming source intended to convey. But I argue that the confrontation caused by Nangezang's behavior could be understood differently from a borderland standpoint. First, the timing and geopolitical context here are particularly important: Nangezang came to the Ming court in 1448. It was only several months after the Zagu leader suddenly died at the stake in the Zagu and Dongbuhanhu competition. Relying on the Ming's support to compete with Dongbuhanhu for years,[203] the Zagu ruling class immediately dispatched an envoy to Beijing since the regime was in great need of the Ming's support. Therefore, it is less likely that Nangezang, who was chosen to carry out such an important mission, would bring the Ming a pile of trash.

The gifts of swords and armor further prove that the Ming misunderstood Nangezang. These seemingly strange "tributary gifts" were not traditional tribute items one might expect, such as horses, Buddhist statues, or spices, and they were not even locally made, seeing as in other places they were also designated as Ming-made swords and armor (明刀劍、明甲). From the Ming official's perspective, they were nothing more than scrap metal that frontier swindlers used to trick the Ming in return for rewards. But in the mountain society, swords and armor had specific political meaning: they were tokens of political alliance and symbols of submission and peace-making. Sending weaponry was a symbolic action that expressed one's wish for non-violent dialogue and peaceful submission. When Gelek Gyaltsen was trying to call for an alliance, he sent envoys to bring armor to his potential allies to demonstrate his sincerity.[204] When Jiawu wished to plead for mercy from the Ming for his brutality at

[203] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 171, the 13th year, month X, yisi.
[204] Yu, *Yuqian Ji*, 421.

the Hanshui Mountain Pass, he also sent six sets of iron armor to the Ming court to ask for forgiveness.[205]

In this regard, Nangezang was not disrespectful at all: he brought along the most important and appropriate token for such a scenario at a time when Zagu was desperate for Ming's support to compete with Dongbuhanhu. But this intention was beyond the Ming's comprehension: on the contrary, the Ming accused Zagu of lacking sincerity, even though they were a regular tribute payer. Similar misunderstanding also applied to some Ming officials' scornful comments when they describe the Buddhist statues and relics (舍利) that some Tibetan Buddhist monks brought to the Ming court as valueless scrap.[206] However, in a Buddhist society like Tibet, religious items were considered the most precious things. And even the fine fabrics and silk that the Tibetans received from the Ming were tailored to make huge Thangkas for rituals or added to the raw materials to make Buddha statues.[207] Such cases prove that the tributary interactions might mean quite differently to different participants. Downgrading their reward was the Ming's reaction after evaluating the economic value of Zagu's "tributes;" but from Nangezang's point of view, it was the indicator that suggested the breaking of a long-term friendship between the Ming and Zagu at a fatal moment. Of course, Nangezang was greatly outraged by this response. When this diplomatic mission failed, Zagu gradually withdrew from the competition with Dongbuhanhu as well.

While the rise of Zagu abruptly halted in the late 1440s, Gelek Gyaltsen developed a taste for aggression and pushed further on. In 1450, he wished to send a delegation to Beijing, and the tributary gifts he prepared were horses, swords, and armor. Horses

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[205] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 151, the 12th year, month III, wuyin.
[206] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 176, the 14th year, month III, xinsi.
[207] Wu, "Mingdai Sichou Dui Zangqu de Shuru Jiqi Yingxiang,"60.

had always been a top tributary item that the Ming lacked and hence desired to receive from northwest Sichhuan. Swords and armor, in this context, most likely indicated Gelek Gyaltsen's intention to use a peace-making token to lessen the Ming's vigilance. But Gelek Gyaltsen's wishful thinking failed as his delegation proposal was rejected by the Ming's Sichuan officials, who could not tell Gelek Gyaltsen's real intentions based on his recent bold and illegal actions.[208] Yet Gelek Gyaltsen was not someone who easily gave up. In 1451, he requested to send a tribute delegation to Ming court again. But when the Ming officials approached the envoys to communicate their second denial, the tribute envoys replied: "Alas! It is too late. The horses were already on the way."[209] This clearly shows that Gelek Gyaltsen had already decided to ignore the Ming's regulation since the Chinese empire could not check him anyway. Quite by coincidence, this arrogant envoy was killed shortly after he took the horses into the Zagu territory, and all the horses were forced back to Dongbuhanhu's territory.[210] This incident provided Gelek Gyaltsen an ideal catalyst to escalate his aggressive actions. Later that year, he ordered more than 2000 soldiers to march into Zagu territory, and the justification for this action was to escort a mere 100 tribute horses.[211] In this case, we can see that going to Beijing to pay tribute had become an excuse that provided Gelek Gyaltsen a legitimate reason to move armed soldiers around and march into the territory of neighboring polity.

The Tumu incident in 1449 and the resulting political turbulence at the Ming court forced the Ming to adopt a smoother way to interact with Dongbuhanhu. Comparing a 1450 imperial edict with one from 1447, we see that outright rebukes were already

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[208] Yu, *Yuqian Ji*, 145.
[209] Yu, *Yuqian Ji*, 145.
[210] Yu, *Yuqian Ji*, 145.
[211] Yu, *Yuqian Ji*, 145.

replaced by gentle and cautious suggestions.[212] Moreover, since the Ming still had the impression that Gelek Gyaltsen was a mere mountain regime figurehead thirsty for power and money, the court kept raising Gelek Gyaltsen's ranking and granting him many tribute rewards in exchange for frontier peace. In 1452, the court decided to raise Gelek Gyaltsen to the level of a regional Military Commissioner-in-chief (都指揮使), which was a 2A ranking in the Ming's bureaucratic system. In return, the Ming wished that Gelek Gyaltsen would return the territory that he had annexed back to Zagu.[213] When Gelek Gyaltsen seemed to have followed the Ming's instruction, the Ming emperor was quite delighted and even praised Gelek Gyaltsen as the "number one iron mountain guarding the empire's west."[214] At the same time, the court granted preferential treatment to tributary groups from Dongbuhanhu. In 1452 and 1453, a total of eight Dongbuhanhu embassies went to Beijing. This is exactly the privilege that only Zagu could enjoy several years ago. Although these envoys behaved quite rudely on their way to Beijing and frequently conducted illegal activities, the court decided to pardon their criminal behavior.[215] After all, from the Ming court's perspective, Gelek Gyaltsen was just a greedy barbarian who only pursued material benefits from the tributary system.[216]

In 1453, a Ming official filed a complaint to the Ming court about Dongbuhanhu's tributary group and how they had disturbed the social order along the route. This document allows us to, on one hand, get a sense of what kind of scene the Dongbuhanhu envoys had made in the Chinese heartland, and on the other hand,

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[212] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 157, the 12th year, month VIII, xinwei; *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 193, the 1st year (jingtai), month VIII, renshen.
[213] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 213, the 3th year (jingtai), month II, dinghai.
[214] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 224, the 3th year (jingtai), month XII, gengzi.
[215] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 193, the 1st year (jingtai), month VIII, renshen.
[216] Yu, *Yuqian Ji*, 146.

investigate what exactly Dongbuhanhu had gained from such tributary trips. The memorial reads:

> Li Shi, Grand Coordinator and Right Censor-in-chief in Huguang (巡撫湖廣右都御史) submits the following memorial:
> When the fan monks (番僧), State Preceptors (國師), Meditation Masters (禪師) and Lama (剌麻) from Sichuan Dongbuhanhu Grand Pacification Commission (四川董卜韓胡宣慰司) completed their tributary mission, they were allowed to bring tea back. With this permission, [these envoy monks] purchased over ten thousand catties of tea as well as articles made of copper, tin, iron, and porcelain. [The envoys] requested boats to transport all the goods to Chengdu and then hired porters to carry them into the mountains. Certain areas along their return path, such as 10 *li* in Qiong county (邛縣), 2 *li* in Mingshan County (名山縣), 4 *li* in Yingjing County (榮經縣) and 10 *li* in Yazhou (雅州), were primarily dwelled in by Bo-Yi indigenes（僰夷土民）. [These non-Han people] were not used to shouldering loads, but preferred to hoist them on their back. For places where proceeding was difficult, even women were required to help lift the goods for as far as four to five hundred *li*. But when goods were delivered, these porters were to be blamed [by Dongbuhanhu envoys] for stealing and were forced to pay for the loss. Moreover, the regions [these envoys and porters travelled through] were of precipitous terrain and scarce population. The envoys and their retinue travelled and rested in the wilderness day and night, and hence disturbed the honest Hua-xia ethos with their barbaric and vulgar customs. When passing through postal stations, these people always asked for copious wine and food and tended to harm people with their weapons when their needs were not met. Even those chiliarches and centurions appointed [by the Ming court] as their accompaniment could not stop such behaviors. Noticing the material benefits of such tributary missions, our frontier subjects began to encourage their sons to learn the foreign language so as to sneak into tributary groups as fan monks and interpreters. Now I propose that the Investigation Bureau (都察院) should ban behaviors such as private contacts with fan monks, trading tea and other articles made of copper, tin, iron, and porcelain with them, and sending their sons to be monks and interpreters. Anyone who dares to violate should be banished beyond the northern border to be frontier soldiers, and his neighbors who fail to report [the outlaw actions] would be punished accordingly as well.[217]

[217] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 232, the 4st year (jingtai), month VIII, jiachen. Research about late Qing and early Republican era tea trade shows that the so-called "beifu" (porter) could carry up to 200 kg of tea, and during busy seasons, up to 3000 carriers hoist their loads and depart every day. See Booz, "In and Out of Borders: The 'Beifu' 背夫 Tea Porters Encounter Tibet," 257.

This lengthy but rich memorial highlights at least three aspects of Dongbuhanhu's participation in the tributary system. First, it indicates that the interaction between the Ming and the mountain society had already affected regions beyond the highland world. The memorial was written by an official who stationed at Huguang, which was an important distribution center for trans-Yangtze trade. According to Chen Zhigang, in the mid-15th century, the price for tea at Huguang was much cheaper than that of Sichuan,[218] and this was most likely why Dongbuhanhu envoys chose to purchase tea at Huguang. Although Huguang was quite far away from Dongbuhanhu, the envoys did not need to worry about the shipping cost; according to the Ming's regulation, all expenses for the tributary envoys' round trip, including lodging, accommodations, and transportation, were at the Ming's cost. Technically the envoys had to buy and transport things on their own; but oftentimes, as this memorial demonstrates, the Ming had to take care of the shipment of goods that envoys acquired through private trade as well. It is reasonable to speculate that the Dongbuhanhu envoys must have bought a tremendous amount of goods at Huguang and requested the local administrative office to summon labor for transportation, to the great annoyance of the local official.

Second, the memorial indicates that what really worried the Ming officials was the disturbance such tributary groups caused to the social order in Chinese heartland. Not only did it create a financial burden for regional governments to host the tributary envoys and additional workload for commoners' corvée labor, but the official also claimed that the tributary groups had generated considerable bad influence on the Ming's subjects and culture as a whole. He argued that the tributary groups' frequent travel along the Ming's postal network and their alleged barbaric behaviors had

[218] Chen, *Mingqing Chuanzang Chadao de Shichang Yu Shehui*, 22.

become a landscape that stained Confucius culture, and more importantly, corrupted those who lived near the frontier region. As many of the Ming's frontier subjects began to engage with the tributary groups illegally, either by faking their identities and sneaked into the tributary groups or conducting private trade with them, the Ming lost not only potential taxpayers but also regulation on frontier affairs. Therefore, in the eyes of this official, the Donbuhanhu envoys, probably together with other mountain regime tributary groups that enjoyed court privileges, had done China no good whatsoever.

Third, this memorial paves the way for my discussion of the meaning of the tributary system for the Dongbuhanhu regime's own development. There are, again, three points on this issue. The first, as explicitly revealed in the memorial, has to do with Donghuhanhu's economic development. One conventional narrative about the tributary system is that while the Chinese dynasties acquired political and ideological satisfaction when the tributary regimes came to pay homage, the tributary regimes were mainly interested in the material benefits behind the interaction. Such an interpretation, I argue, is somewhat oversimplified. On one hand, as my examinations above have demonstrated, participating in the tributary system also benefited mountain regimes politically, as they could have their authority recognized by an external source of legitimacy. On the other hand, few studies discuss what the material benefits meant to tributary regimes. This is not a self-evident question; rather, it points to the issue of how tributary regimes spent the wealth they had gained after they returned from their trip.

In the case of Dongbuhanhu, we see that the envoys primarily brought two types of goods back to the mountain: tea and metal items. Widely believed by the Ming people

to contain the basic nutrition to keep various kinds of barbarians alive,[219] tea actually carried important social functions in the mountain society as well. It firstly helped mountain regimes like Dongbuhanhu consolidate patronage over religious communities. Religious groups in the mid-15th century Tibetan world had huge demand for tea. One source indicates that one monastery requested 50,000 catties of tea from the Ming.[220] Another documents that one monk alone sought to purchase 6,000 catties of tea in the Chinese heartland.[221] Therefore, Dongbuhanhu could use the huge amount of tea that it acquired through tributary missions to win the support of the religious communities to strengthen local governance. Moreover, it indicates that religious communities under Dongbuhanhu's rule could enjoy higher tea purchase quota from the Ming court.[222] This, undoubtedly, would provide incentive for more religious communities to submit to Dongbuhanhu.

In addition to appealing to religious communities, tea in the mountain society was also used in transactions. Although we do not have 15th century sources, a study on 18th century eastern Tibet shows that tea, because of its broad acceptance, easy preservation, and wide circulation, was in fact used as currency in barter exchange.[223] It is highly possible that tea was already used in this way several centuries earlier by the mountain regimes to compensate the labor of their subjects. Therefore, the more tea these regimes acquired from the Ming, the better they could control the local economy.

There are few sources dealing with how Dongbuhanhu rulers made use of the metal articles that the envoys bought back. But here are some of my speculative hypotheses.

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[219] *Mingshi*, shihuozhi, juan 80.
[220] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 70, the 5st year, month VIII, gengwu.
[221] *Ming muzong shilu*, juan 55, the 4st year, month V, wusheng.
[222] Ren, "Mingdai Xifan Guan Yu Xifan Guan Laiwen," 46.
[223] Chaix, "Construction Work and Wages at the Derge Printing House in the Enghteenth Century."

In addition to daily instruments such as cooking utensils and farming implements, iron articles were most likely recast to make weapons, and this was a tactic frequently adopted by the Mongols at the time.[224] In the same manner, copper and tin articles could either be used as everyday items or smelted into bronze for weaponry, religious items such as Buddhist statues, or decorative ornaments. In terms of porcelain, I argue it was more of a social status marker in the mountain society. For most mountain inhabitants at the time, porcelain from the Chinese heartland was not easily accessible. Therefore, they were most likely precious items circulated among the ruling class to highlight their elite identity. As this reasoning goes, porcelain, together with other tributary rewards that I will examine in the following paragraphs, might also have functioned in making political alliances for their luxury value.

The second aspect of the tributary system's local meaning is that it facilitated trans-regional communication and interaction among multiple mountain regimes. Going to Beijing to pay tribute became an important and legitimate reason for regime rulers and their reliable agents to travel to other regimes, and thus these trips were a good opportunity to strengthen social networks or form political alliances. The memorial reveals that while Dongbuhanhu envoys travelled through the mountainous areas on their way back, they interacted closely with the so-called Bo-Yi indigenes. Another memorial vividly illustrates how tribute missions allowed Dongbuhanhu and its close ally, Shangba, to dispatch messengers between themselves for various types of conspiracies.

In 1452, before the Dongbuhanhu tributary envoys' departure for Beijing, the Shangba leader sent an underling named Lazhong (臘仲) to bring 120 horses to Dongbuhanhu. Lazhong's mission was to assume a Dongbuhanhu envoy identity so

[224] *Ming muzong shilu*, juan 70, the 6st year, month V, yiyou.

as to bring the horses to Beijing as tributary horses and thereby take a share of the rewards. Using the fake identity of an interpreter named Sonam Rinchen (鎖南領占), Lazhong traveled to Beijing, presented the "tributary horses," visited the palace of the Shu Prince (蜀王府) in Chengdu on his way back, and was at last detected by the Ming military and captured. After torturing and executing Lazhong, the Ming military on one hand made up a certificate of Lazhong's death by illness and informed Dongbuhanhu, and on the other hand learned that Lazhong had using taken advantage of multiple tribute missions to frequently travel between Dongbuhanhu and Shangba as a messenger.[225] Such a function of the tributary system was most likely beyond the Ming court's imagination. Moreover, since the Ming required all tributary envoys to stay at *Huitong Guan*, the Ming's official site to accommodate diplomatic delegations, tributary envoys from the mountain society had many chances to interact in Beijing, probably even more than when they were in northwest Sichuan. For highland inhabitants who had fewer chances to interact with strangers from other regions, delivering tribute horses in Beijing, the great metropolitan city, had undoubtably opened a new world for them. Of course, there was also a downside to such interactions, as one fight between western Sichuan and Ryukyu envoys resulted in some serious injuries and Ming's ensuring punishments.[226]

The third way that the tributary system affected the Dongbuhanhu regime's development is that it functioned as a model which Gelek Gyaltsen could mimic when building a Dongbuhanhu-centered regional hierarchical system, and the tributary rewards and all kinds of material goods that Dongbuhanhu envoys acquired in the Chinese heartland in turn became Dongbuhanhu's material basis to construct its own

[225] Yu, *Yuqian Ji*, 437-439.
[226] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 495。

regional order. One 1452 memorial reveals how Dongbuhanhu was creating its mini tributary system in the mountain society. At the time, a Tibetan Buddhist monk was wandering around among mountain communities to lobby them to go to Beijing to pay tribute, and in return, the monk himself might be rewarded by the Ming court for such merits. But later he noticed that the so-called raw barbarians he successfully convinced were stopped halfway by Dongbuhanhu henchmen. In addition, the henchmen promised those who were about to go to Beijing that if they paid tribute to Dongbuhanhu, instead of to the Ming court, each person in their communities would receive four bolts of Sansuo cloth (三梭布). For the community leaders, their needs for gold seals, silver seals, or high-ranking official titles might also be satisfied.[227]

This message, though probably not the intention of the Tibetan Buddhist monk, revealed the wealth Dongbuhanhu had at the time. Sansuo cloth was primarily made in the lower Yangtze delta region, the center for Ming China's textile industry, and hence was of supreme quality. One reference here is that while Gelek Gyaltsen promised those who joined him would receive four bolts personally, the Ming could only reward those who refused Dongbuhanhu's offer with one bolt of Sansuo cloth per person.[228] Undoubtedly, Dongbuhanhu had acquired a huge amount of such products through the tributary system, together with other gold and silver items. In that regard, the Ming's tributary system not only served as a geopolitical model for Gelek Gyaltsen to imagine the hierarchical order in the mountain world, but also provided him with the capital to build such a system. But one must note that Gelek Gyaltsen was not constructing an identical system to the Ming model: he was mixing the Ming's tributary system with the religious order that had dominated the mountain

[227] Yu, *Yuqian Ji*, 213.
[228] Yu, *Yuqian Ji*, 213.

world for quite a while. In 1452, an Ming interpreter reported to the court that Dongbuhanhu had dispatched an underling to a community called A'sigong (阿思貢) with a set of armor, and the Dongbuhanhu envoy told the A'sigong leader to convert from Tibetan Buddhism to Bön.[229] If he agreed to do so, Gelek Gyaltsen would build a Bön temple in A'sigong and allocate five hundred Bön monks under his command.[230] This message not only proves my earlier argument that armor and weaponry were widely used in the mountain society to make political alliances or show an intention for peace talks, but also indicates that building an empire featuring Bön religion had always been at the center of Gelek Gyaltsen's vision.

By the early 1450s, Gelek Gyaltsen had successfully eliminated the Zagu threat that had haunted him for quite some time, accumulated a considerably amount of wealth through its tributary interactions with the Ming, and started his empire-building enterprise that feature a combination of the Ming-style tributary system and mountain-style Bön belief. His next move was to break through the barriers of the mountain and invade the Ming.

The War that Never Happened

While the Ming still saw Gelek Gyaltsen as a greedy barbarian who was only interested in the material benefits of the tributary system, his ambition had only grown larger by the early 1450s. He started to plan an invasion of the Sichuan plain, the most important and economically developed region in the empire's west.

In 1452, Gelek Gyaltsen wished the Ming to provide him some books and gave a list to a Ming frontier official. The list began with some works from the Confucian canon, such as *Zhou Yi* (*Book of Changes* 周易), *Shangshu* (*Book of Documents* 尚

[229] Yu, *Yuqian Ji*, 421.
[230] Yu, *Yuqian Ji*, 416.

書), and *Mao Shi* (*Book of Songs* 毛詩). But two geographic guidebooks appear at the end: *Fangyu shenglan* (*Travelogue to Sites of Scenic Beauty* 方輿勝覽) and *Chengdu ji* (*Records of Chengdu* 成都記). Although Gelek Gyaltsen's requests were made with a modest and respectful tone, as the Ming official remarked, there was more behind the book list. The Ming official pointed out that the Confucian classics that Gelek Gyaltsen requested could be easily purchased at any bookstore. Therefore, this was merely subterfuge to mask the last two titles on the list that contained important geographical information on the Chengdu plain and could thus be referenced for military purposes.[231] Figuring out this rebellious intention, the official did not give Gelek Gyaltsen what he asked for.

Together with the book list, Gelek Gyaltsen also sent some valuable items, including a silver wine jar and a gold pearl, for the official personally.[232] This was obviously a bribe, a way of interaction that was prevalent at the time between mountain inhabitants and Ming officials. Ming records documented many cases in which corrupt Ming officials were caught and punished for extorting bribes from the locals.[233] Gelek Gyaltsen even knew how to take advantage of the Ming's low tolerance for frontier corruption at times for specific purposes. When he reported the Zagu incident to the Ming court in which the Zagu ruler was poisoned by his concubine, he also claimed that this lady had bribed a Ming chiliarch to slander Dongbuhanhu, a rhetoric that might further damage Zagu's image as a loyal regime.[234] When the Ming military commander, Kou Shen, repeatedly rejected Gelek Gyaltsen's requests to open up new routes in the mountain, the Dongbuhanhu ruler sent

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[231] Yu, *Yuqian Ji*, 176.
[232] Yu, *Yuqian Ji*, 176.
[233] For examples, see *Ming muzong shilu*, juan 155, the 12st year, month VI, guihai; *Ming muzong shilu*, juan 176, the 14st year, month III, xinsi.
[234] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 171, the 13th year, month X, yisi.

memorials to the court to impeach Kou Shen for taking bribes from Zagu, abusing underlings, and adultery.[235] Although there is no way for us to discern whether Gelek Gyaltsen's accusations were founded or not, these claims did cause the Ming to investigate those who leaned toward Zagu or created obstacles for Dongbuhanhu and temporarily suspend or remove them from their positions.

Collecting geographical information on Ming territory and sabotaging the credibility of Ming officials, Gelek Gyaltsen also challenged the Ming's authority by re-opening the Dong Min-Wang Yong case. Feeling that the Ming was far from fair in settling the disputes, Gelek Gyaltsen promised Dong Min's nephew that he would hunt down Wang Yong and get revenge for Dong Ming who received wrongful treatment and died in vein.[236] This decision greatly upset the Ming court because Gelek Gyaltsen was openly questioning the Ming's role as the highest authority and arbiter of justice. Gelek Gyaltsen's ambition to take up hegemony over social order in the mountain society is also seen in the process of Shangba succession: when the old Shangba religious leader passed away, it was Gelek Gyaltsen who addressed the Ming that he had picked the next Shangba religious leader in the Ming's stead.[237]

Tension between the Ming and Dongbuhanhu also escalated over territorial disputes. At first, the Ming wished to act out its role as overlord by requesting Gelek Gyaltsen to return the territory he occupied in recent years. Gelek Gyaltsen indeed gave the land back to Zagu and Dasiman following the Ming's instructions. The Ming was at first satisfied with this result and praised Gelek Gyaltsen for his cooperation,[238] but later found out that Gelek Gyaltsen in fact had withheld the seals of those

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[235] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 190, the 1st year (jingtai), month III, jiazi; *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 210, the 2nd year (jingtai), month XI, dingsi.
[236] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 227, the 4th year (jingtai), month V, rensheng.
[237] Yu, *Yuqian Ji*, 416.
[238] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 224, the 3th year (jingtai), month XII, gengzi.

regions,[239] which means that Zagu and Dasiman only regained their rulership nominally, while Dongbuhanhu still controlled these regions in the jurisdictional sense. In other words, Gelek Gyaltsen still maintained control over a large portion of Zagu and Dasiman territory.[240] Moreover, worried that those who lived in Zagu and Dasiman territory might reveal strategic information to the Ming military, Gelek Gyaltsen forcefully relocated many of the inhabitants to the hinterlands of the mountain society.[241]

Compared with the territories of Zagu and Dasiman, Weizhou (威州) was an asset Gelek Gyaltsen refused to give up. From the Ming's perspective, Weizhou was of strategic importance and a significant spot to control the northwest Sichuan mountain region.[242] Before the 1450s, the Ming had sanctioned Zagu to implement indirect rule over the region until Dongbuhanhu took it over. The Ming was quite sensitive about Dongbuhanhu's control over Weizhou because it allowed Dongbuhanhu's army,\ during wartime to come down from the mountain from all four directions simultaneously, an advantage the Ming was unable to curb.[243] But when the Ming court requested the return of Weizhou, Gelek Gyaltsen replied in an extremely offensive tone: "We took Weizhou from the hands of the Zagu people, not you Han people. For nine days and nine nights, I could not figure out [the logic] of this imperial edict [that asks us to give it back to the Ming]. Weizhou is merely a rocky mountain smaller than a fist, you'd better not keep pushing to take it back. If you insist on taking it back, a bloody war that can last one thousand years awaits you!"[244] These lines clearly demonstrated that Gelek Gyaltsen did not take the Ming's

[239] Yu, *Yuqian Ji*, 212.
[240] Yu, *Yuqian Ji*, 175.
[241] Yu, *Yuqian Ji*, 213.
[242] Yu, *Yuqian Ji*, 145.
[243] Yu, *Yuqian Ji*, 146.
[244] Yu, *Yuqian Ji*, 212.

political superiority seriously anymore and refused the court's further intervention of regional affairs, and he obviously was not afraid of military confrontation. Faced with such a resolution, the Ming court ordered frontier officials to drop the case for the time being.[245]

While Gelek Gyaltsen was busy building his empire and new regional world order in the mountain, the Ming was not just sitting around waiting for Dongbuhanhu's further moves. In response to the near completion of Dongbuhanhu watchtowers just outside the west gate of Songpan and more and more spies watching the Ming's military deployment,[246] the court began to gear up for a seemingly inevitable clash. In 1452, the Ming was on one hand trying to divide the Dongbuhanhu alliance by surrendering or killing some of Gelek Gyaltsen's allies, and on the other hand acquiring support from Gelek Gyaltsen's old foe, Wang Yong, who agreed to mount a flank attack on Dongbuhanhu once the war started.[247] From 1453 to 1455, Ming soldiers and military logisticians were dispatched to strategic locations,[248] military meetings and personnel rearrangements were frequent,[249] and a new battalion in Guanxian county, the place the Ming officials thought to be the site of Dongbuhanhu's first attack, was quickly whipped into fighting shape.[250] The war could break out at any moment.

In the summer of 1455, after years of preparation for the Dongbuhanhu invasion, the Ming court suddenly received news of Gelek Gyaltsen's death. No one saw this coming. The news came so abruptly that even senior court officials did not believe it

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[245] Yu, *Yuqian Ji*, 224.
[246] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 221, the 3th year (jingtai), month IX, renxu; *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 233, the 4th year (jingtai), month IX, yihai.
[247] Yu, *Yuqian Ji*, 416-417.
[248] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 220, the 3th year (jingtai), month IX, gengyin; *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 221, the 3th year (jingtai), month IX, renxu; *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 252, the 6th year (jingtai), month IV, gengzi.
[249] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 251, the 6th year (jingtai), month III, gengsheng.
[250] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 255, the 6th year (jingtai), month VI, yiyou.

at first and hastened their underlings to double check.[251] Several months later, a memorial in the name of Gelek Gyaltsen came to court. However, neither the tone nor the addressed title looked like Gelek Gyaltsen.[252] This confirmed the court officials' supposition that something unusual had taken place in the Dongbuhanhu ruling house: Gelek Gyaltsen might really be dead. Yet historical materials never specify the true reason for the unexpected death of this ambitious leader.

With Gelek Gyaltsen's death, the threat that Dongbuhanhu posed to the Ming gradually faded away. In retrospect, the Dongbuhanhu turmoil was one of the biggest crises that took place in the Ming empire's western frontier; the next one did not arise until the arrival of the Mongols one century later. The Ming-centered tributary system, ironically, contributed considerably to this mid-15th century frontier emergency. The vicissitudes of the Dongbuhanhu regime closely correlate to its participation in the tributary system: among all the Dongbuhanhu tributary missions to the Ming from 1415 to 1626, around one quarter of them took place within the two decades of the 1440s and 1450s. Dongbuhanhu's rise, as a local consequence of the tributary system, was most likely unexpected to the Ming: after all, the system was originally perceived and designed to consolidate the empire's authority, not to undermine it.

Summary

Through the lens of a group of mountain regimes, Dongbuhanhu in particular, this chapter has examined how the locals of northwest Sichuan understood the mountain society and its relationship with the Chinese dynasty. In the early to mid-15th century when Ming China's infiltration was still limited, the mountain society was largely on

[251] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 255, the 6th year (jingtai), month VI, jiayin.
[252] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 258, the 6th year (jingtai), month IX, renwu.

its own, and it had peculiar social organization modes, secular and religious hierarchies, and norms and principles for inter-community interactions. When interacting with Ming China, the mountain regimes spoke fluently in the language of the tributary system but acted primarily to their own benefit.

The mountainous geomorphology of northwest Sichuan considerably shaped the region's geopolitical power dynamics: because of the ragged terrain, the indigenous regimes were limited in terms of growth and they frequently clashed with one another. Yet due to logistic, communications, and military difficulties and the ensuing high cost in managing a centralized regime, the mountain society demonstrated a rather scattered power pattern in which multiple regimes frequently clashed, yet were unable to fully annex each other, and therefore were forced to co-exist. Certain elements, such as religion, blood ties, or ambitious leadership might transcend the social and natural boundaries to foster cross-regional confederation, but such alliances were usually quite fragile and hence not perennial.

By analyzing the features of early to mid-15th century mountain society, I hope to further dialogue with the literature in two ways. First, my argument positions itself in relation to the so-called Zomia model. It is tricky to say whether northwest Sichuan belongs to what James Scott identifies as the Zomia region. After all, Scott only claims that "parts of Sichuan" fall into his Zomia category, but he does not specify which specific parts he is referring to.[253] But even if northwest Sichuan is only the margin of Zomia, it still indicates certain elements that might revise Scott's characterization of the Zomia world. First, while Scott claims that Zomia features anarchy, in northwest Sichuan we see a highly hierarchical society where rulership was legitimized in many ways. For both Dongbuhanhu and Zagu, the rulers managed

[253] Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*,ix.

intra- and inter-regime relationships with sophisticated techniques and proactively promoted such ruling norms to other mountain regimes. Secondly, while Scott highlights the agency of highland inhabitants as they proactively escaped from lowland states, in northwest Sichuan the mountain regimes were not escaping at all. Quite the opposite, they approached the lowland Ming China for various reasons, and Dongbuhanhu even wished to invade and occupy lowland territory. Such a highland-lowland relationship as that we see between Ming China and the mountain society might expand Scott's Zomia model to some degree.

The frequent interaction between the mountain world and Chinese dynasties points to the second intervention of this chapter: the studies on the tributary system. Historiographically speaking, scholarly focus on Ming China's tributary interaction has been quite unbalanced. Most previous research centered on foreign polities but seldom paid attention to the Ming's frontier regimes. Such a vacuum in the literature disguises important historical facts such as the local ramifications of the tributary system and how exactly frontier regimes perceived and made use of it. This chapter has addressed these issues from two vantage points. The first one is material culture. Above I have highlighted how different material goods, whether they were called tributary gifts or not, carried different cultural connotations as they flowed within the transregional network. Therefore, misunderstandings likely occurred, and those so-called tributary items functioned differently in different scenarios. Such minor yet nuanced details have been largely omitted in the previous macro-historical narrative about the tributary system. Secondly, I have pointed out how the supposedly Ming-centered tributary system could backfire on the Ming when participants in the system made use of it in ways that beyond the court's expectations. In the Ming's eyes, the system was a network designed to implement indirect control and pacify the distant

frontier; but from the perspective of the mountain regimes, the system was a supply line through which they could acquire political capital and material resources for their own benefit. Wealth and power provided by the Ming not only caused competition between various mountain regimes, but also nursed the ambition of highland rulers who eventually aimed to invade the Chinese dynasty.

Chapter 4: Monks

Tibetan Buddhism, in late imperial Chinese and Inner Asian history, was a religious belief, an identity marker, an administrative device, and a source of legitimacy for rulership. The spread of Tibetan Buddhism was initiated in many ways, and various individuals and communities patronized the religion for different political, ideological, and economic reasons. This chapter investigates the activities of Tibetan Buddhist monks in the highland and their perceptions of the region from the 1430s to the late 15th century. It examines how Tibetan Buddhism spread and gradually gained power in the early 15th century, experienced rapid development in highland society under the patronage of the Ming court in the mid-15th century, and continued to prosper in the late 15th century, even when Ming support was substituted by strict regulation. In this regard, this chapter takes a local history perspective to examine Tibetan Buddhism's development in the highland. Instead of understanding it as an instrument of the imperial center for the control of the frontier region, this chapter considers Tibetan Buddhism as a significant social mechanism that provided the driving force that changed the course of the highland's historical development.

Some clarifications about terms and concepts must first be made. This chapter includes extensive discussion of religious and ethnic terms, many of which have similar English translations. Two Chinese characters, 漢 and 番, frequently appear in in this chapter's primary sources. But in Chinese texts, they can refer to either ethnic or religious concepts depending on the context. Hence in this chapter, when indicating ethnic concepts, the characters will be presented in their direct transliteration forms,

Han and Fan, to refer to the ethnic groups of Han people (漢人) and Fan people (番人). But when used as religious concepts to refer to 漢傳佛教 and 藏傳佛教 (or 番教 Fanjiao in Ming documents), the concepts will be translated as Chinese Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism. In this regard, phrases such as "Tibetan Buddhist" would merely point to one's religious identity. If the Tibetan Buddhist's ethnic background needs to be emphasized, I will use "ethnic-Han Tibetan Buddhist" or "ethnic-Fan Tibetan Buddhist" to specify the difference.

Domino Effect in the Eurasian World

Sitting at the easternmost fringes of the Tibetan plateau, the highland region has long been the periphery in the Tibetan world. Throughout history, it intermittently received cultural and political influence from central Tibet, but was mostly a world of its own. However, the geopolitical role of the highland was redefined by one marked break: Islam's eastward expansion.

From the 13th century on, a macro-scale geopolitical reshuffling in eastern Eurasia triggered by the development of Islam considerably affected Tibet's outreach interactions. To Tibet's north, the spread of Islam had reached the eastern Chagatai Khanate by the early 14th century, competed with Buddhist communities, and converted a considerable portion of the local population by the end of the 14th century.[254] As Buddhism to a great extent bridged Tibet with its northern neighbor, such interaction soon became marginal when Buddhists were expelled from the region. Similar changes took place in regions south and west of Tibet. With the mid-14th century rise of Tamerlane, who established Islam as the ideological pillar of his reign and extended his military forces south to northwest India,[255] Tibet's western gate

[254] Dai Matsui, "A Mongolian Decree from the Chaghataid Khanate Discovered at Dunhuang," 159-178.
[255] Manz, "Tamerlane and the Symbolism of Sovereignty."

was closed, and its spiritual influence could reach as far west as Ladakh but never beyond the Hindu Kush.[256] In the south, ever since the Delhi Sultanate took over north India and destroyed the Buddhist bases there, Tibet was treated no differently than a land of infidels in the eyes of the Islamized Indians.[257] It is only natural to assume that the trade volume between Tibet and India diminished at the same time as their tenuous religious contacts.

Facing the Islamized and thus estranged regions to its north, west, and south, Tibet gradually turned its outreach efforts to the east. This does not mean Tibet's interaction with the east only started at that time. But still, the geopolitical reconfiguration undoubtedly intensified such communications. When more and more Tibetans began to migrate to the east and thus intensified trans-regional interactions, the demographic pattern of the Tibetan world changed as a result. As Elliot Sperling describes, "the once marginalized region was integrated with the Tibetan core."[258] The growth of new market towns in eastern Tibet, most famously Dartsedo, was just one phenomena that emerged out of these geopolitical changes. What followed this growing contact between eastern and central Tibet was a changing of geographical perception within the Tibetan world. Historical materials indicate that by the early 14th century, the two sub-divisions of eastern Tibet—Mdo-smad (later widely referred as Amdo) and Mdo-khams (Dokham, also known as Kham)—had officially taken shape, which marked the ultimate formation of the so-called three Tibetan regions.[259]

As the contact between central and eastern Tibet strengthened in the mid-14th century, a growing religious population also began to move eastward. Because of the

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[256] In 1447, the Muslims even mounted a jihad to invade Tibet from its west. For details, see Petech, "Ya-Ts'e, Gu-Ge, Pu-Ran: A New Study," 385.
[257] Elverskog, *Buddhism and Islam on the Silk Road*, 175-227.
[258] Sperling, "The Szechwan-Tibet Frontier in the Fifteenth Century," 39.
[259] Shi, "Zangzu Sanda Chuantong Dili Quyu Xingcheng Guocheng Tantao," 54.

religious domination of the Sakya school in central Tibet, many other sects chose to open new religious realms in the east. For example, Rangjung Dorje, the religious leader of the Kagyu School traveled to places as far as Mt. Kawagerbo and Mt. Konka in the Chinese-Tibetan borderland. In these far-east Tibetan regions, Rangjung Dorje not only actively participated in monastic construction and organized religious gatherings, but also mediated conflicts among local figureheads.[260] These contacts exposed many eastern Tibet inhabitants to Tibetan Buddhism.

It is noteworthy that the eastward movement of many Tibetan Buddhist communities did not necessarily lead to its religious booming in the highland region. Tibetan Buddhism's impending popularity in the area was not spontaneous or unconditioned. Instead, it was the product of a series of negotiations, competitions and even coincidences. This chapter argues that Ming China's frontier policies pertaining to Tibetan Buddhism played a significant role in facilitating the religion's dissemination and penetration in the highland. These Ming policies' unexpected ramifications on the ground eventually changed the highland society's religious landscape.

A Humble Start for Tibetan Buddhism: The Case of Songpan

As a proclaimed Han-Chinese empire, Ming China has long been perceived as unable to wield Tibetan Buddhism as an instrument to rule the empire's margin, especially in comparison to its predecessor, the Mongol Yuan empire, and its successor, the Manchu Qing empire.[261] But some recent scholarship has begun to challenge this cliché. Some scholars point out that the early Ming court was in fact quite active in patronizing Tibetan Buddhist monasteries along its Tibetan frontier as one form of pacification.[262] Others claim that Tibetan Buddhism was also a significant

[260] Ren, "Cong Babangsi Wenwu Kan Gama Gajupai Zai Kangqu de Xingshuai," 1-7.
[261] Dabringhaus, "Chinese Emperors and Tibetan Monks: Religion as an Instrument of Rule."
[262] Debreczeny, "Ethnicity and Esoteric Power Negotiating the Sino-Tibetan Synthesis in Ming Buddhist Painting."

diplomatic tool that Ming China employed to interact with the East and Inner Asian polities that were immersed in a transregional network of monastic Buddhism.[263] Yet all this scholarship mainly takes the top-down perspective of the court and seldom sheds light on what exactly happened on the ground in the highland. In other words, we know little about how and why Tibetan Buddhism was employed as part of the Ming's pacifying-frontier agenda and what ramifications such religious policies had in the local society. This section uses the establishment of religious offices in Songpan as a case study to illustrate how Tibetan Buddhism was incorporated in the Ming's frontier policy as a pragmatic administrative tool.

Songpan (松潘), also known as Zungchu-kha or Sharkhog in Tibetan, is located in modern-day northwest Sichuan. In the Ming dynasty, it was one of the most important strategic strongholds in the Chinese-Tibetan borderlands. But even if Songpan was where the Ming held the heaviest army in northwest Sichuan, the military there, as Elliot Sperling astutely argues, was incompetent in governing the region.[264] In fact, they often made things worse. In 1427, the local Ming army intentionally provoked a rebellion that consisted of more than ten thousand indigenes just because the military needed to find an excuse to keep them from redeployment.[265] In 1430, a military officer who was praised as a hero for suppressing the 1427 rebellion was exposed for severe military abuse, lynching, and conducting unremitting violence against the non-Han inhabitants. He was eventually executed.[266] Moreover, the Songpan military frequently meddled in local conflicts, played various communities against each other, and pillaged the locals' property. Simply put, the malfeasance and low efficiency of

[263] Haufler, "Faces of Transnational Buddhism at the Early Ming Court."
[264] Sperling, "Tibetan Buddhism, Perceived and Imagined, along the Ming-Era Sino-Tibetan Frontier," 167.
[265] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 224, 226, 232.
[266] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 277.

the Ming's military at Songpan prevented them from implementing effective control in the region.

Since the military was unable to keep the peace in Songpan, the Ming began to assign religious officials as supplementary authorities to maintain social order. Appointing religious officials was a policy widely applied in many regions of the highland. In some places, such as Hezhou and Xining, religious officials were dispatched as early as 1389,[267] and most of the dispatched religious officials were Tibetan Buddhist monks. These Buddhists were deemed Buddhist clergy (僧官) in the Ming's bureaucratic system. Buddhist clergy at the prefectural level were registered in the Prefectural Buddhist Registry (僧綱司) as Prefectural Buddhist (Vice) Superior (都綱/副都綱), and those at subperceptual and county level were designated as Subprefectural Buddhist Chief (僧正) and District Buddhist Superior (僧會). Technically, the major duty for Buddhist clergy was to govern and administrate local Buddhist communities and educate non-Han highland inhabitants with Dharma doctrines.

The first Prefectural Buddhist Registry in Songpan, the Prefectural Buddhist Registry of Civilian & Military Guard Commands of Songpan and its Vicinity (松潘等處軍民指揮使司僧綱司), was established in 1431.[268] The fact that this office was set up less than one year after the corrupted military officer's beheading is most likely a reflection of the Ming court's disappointment with the Songpan military and also its high expectations for religious officials to pacify the region. The Songpan Buddhist Registry was instituted at Dabei Monastery (大悲寺), right outside the walls

[267] Ge, *Jinling Fancha Zhi*, 58-59.
[268] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 287.

of Songpan city.[269] At first, the monastery abbot, as well as the Buddhist clergyman, was a certain Buddhist Master called Yueguang (月光). Later, the Dharma throne and official seal were passed to Master Zhizhong (智中).[270]

The religious training and professional experience of both Yueguang and Zhizhong speak to certain peculiar features of this institution. Yueguang's personal background is not specified in historical materials. But he was not a Songpan native and was transferred to the region and appointed the Songpan Prefectural Buddhist Superior.[271] Yet as a total outsider, an ethnic Han monk who practiced Chinese Buddhism, Yueguang was said to be able to pacify the region and guide the local non-Han inhabitants toward good.[272] This might not be an exaggeration in Chinese sources because even a local ethnic Fan chose to take him as Dharma instructor. Ming texts record this Fan person as Yuandan Zangbu (Yonten Zangpo遠丹藏卜). But the first two characters of his name are the Chinese transliteration of the Tibetan word Yon-tan (ཡོན་ཏན), which literarily means wisdom, or *zhi* in Chinese (智). This attests precisely to the fact that he was a disciple of Yueguang because he shared the same generational designation of *Zhi* with Zhizhong, another disciple of Yueguang. In fact, some Chinese texts just refer to this Tibetan as Zhi-Yonten Zangpo (智遠丹藏卜),[273] which is redundant from a semantic perspective but solid evidence to prove his relationship with Master Yueguang and Zhizhong.

Compared with Yueguang or Yonten Zangpo, Zhizhong left more of an impression in historical documents. As an ethnic Han born in Zhejiang surnamed Jiang (姜),[274]

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[269] Zhang, *Minguo Songpan Xianzhi*, juan 5, "tanmiao," 8b.
[270] Wang, *Jiaqing Pengxian Zhi*, juan 19, 4b.
[271] *Qinding gujin tushu jicheng*, "Bowu huibian," "shenyi dian," juan 190.
[272] Wang, *Jiaqing Pengxian Zhi*, juan 19, 4b.
[273] Wang, *Jiaqing Pengxian Zhi*, juan 19, 4b.
[274] Cao, *Shuzhong guangji*, juan 31.

Zhizhong became Yueguang's disciple at the age of twelve and later followed his mentor to Songpan.[275] Probably because of his young age, Zhizhong was capable of speaking Tibetan as he was described as having mastered "bird language," a convention in Chinese historiography to refer to non-Han languages.[276] When Yueguang retired, Zhizhong filled his position and did quite well.[277] He boosted the influence of the Dabei Monastery and incorporated other regional temples as Dabei Monastery's sub-monasteries.[278] Later, Zhizhong himself turned to Master Chushan Shaoqi (楚山紹琦) for Dharma instruction and thus was recognized as one of the carriers in the 28th generation of the Linji Chan lineage.[279]

In addition to the religious aspect, Zhizhong is praised in Buddhist texts for pacifying the rebellious non-Han locals.[280] As one Ming scholar observed: "The Fan people rebelled and fought with each other all the time. But once the Buddhists approached them, the Fan people would immediately prostrated themselves, swore an oath, and dispersed."[281] However, in comparison with this description of the Buddhists' mild actions, another primary source indicates that Zhizhong was once dispatched to devise a night strike on a community the Ming military considered a threat. Zhizhong was described as gallant and swift in the military action, and he personally led the troops to eliminate the entire community.[282] In this regard, the Buddhist clerics were indeed taking over the Ming military's job. Although such actions obviously violated Buddhist officials' commitments to abstaining from

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[275] *Qinding gujin tushu jicheng*, "Bowu huibian," "shenyi dian," juan 190.
[276] Zhang, *Minguo Songpan Xianzhi*, juan 5, "Tanmiao," 8b-9a.
[277] Wang, *Jiaqing Pengxian Zhi*, juan 19,4b.
[278] Wang, *Jiaqing Pengxian Zhi*, juan 19, 4b.
[279] Xiaofei Kang and Donald Sutton inaccurately count Zhizhong as the 27th generation. In Kang and Sutton, *Contesting the Yellow Dragon: Ethnicity, Religion, and the State in the Sino-Tibetan Borderland*, 41. But I still want to thank them for pointing out Zhizhong's important position in the Linji lineage of Han Buddhism. Tongwen, *Xudeng Cungao*, juan 9.
[280] Jingzhu, *Wudeng Huiyuan Xulue*, juan 4.
[281] He, *Mingshan Cang*, 6413.
[282] Zhang, *Minguo Songpan Xianzhi*, juan 3, "bianfang," 11a.

killing, to the Ming, the value of these clergy lay precisely in their capacity to keep the frontier safe, rather than their religious achievement. After years of service in Songpan, Zhizhong retired and moved to one Fazang Monastery near Chengdu, just as Yueguang did,[283] and the position of registry superior was filled by Yonten Zangpo and then a certain Master Zichang.[284]

Many aspects concerning this Buddhist Registry remain unclear to scholars today. For example, although both ethnic Han and ethnic Fan monks lived in the monastery, did they practice Chinese Buddhism or Tibetan Buddhism? In *Contesting the Yellow Dragon*, Xiaofei Kang and Donald Sutton claim that the religious background of both Master Zhizhong and the Dabei Monastery was somewhat hybrid with Tibetan Buddhist features that indicate "Ming tolerance of Tibetan religion."[285] This observation, I argue, derives from their misreading of the materials. So far, no material could attest to the Tibetan Buddhist characters of either Zhizhong or the Dabei Monastery. When Master Zhizhong received a *Zangjing* (藏經), Kang and Sutton translate it as Tibetan scriptures, but in fact *Zangjing* refers to Tipitaka and thus has nothing to do with Tibetan scriptures. For the alleged Tibetan theme of the Dabei Monastery, the evidence the two authors give is the scripture-turning pavilion (轉經樓) in the monastery where a revolving sutra bookcase was installed. But this was not a distinctly Tibetan Buddhist feature and was widely used in Chinese Buddhism as well.[286] In contrast to these scholars' opinions and judging from the existing materials as well as Yueguang and Zhizhong's training, I argue it is almost certain that the Dabei Monastery was a Chinese Buddhist monastery (漢傳佛寺). But

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[283] Wang, *Jiaqing Pengxian Zhi*, juan 19, 4b. Wang, *Jiaqing Pengxian Zhi*, juan 42, 75a.
[284] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 645.
[285] Kang and Sutton, *Contesting the Yellow Dragon*, 42-43.
[286] Luo, "A Grain of Sand: Miniatures as Sacred Repositories, Part I: The Longxingsi Sutra Case." I want to thank Prof. Shao-yun Yang for pointing this online article out for me.

still, this does not rule out the possibility that many Dabei Monastery monks had developed a certain level of knowledge about esoteric Buddhism, and many of them were bilingual.

Setting up shortly after the Ming military in Songpan was proven incompetent, the first Songpan Buddhist Registry and its clergy maintained social order in the region to a certain degree. But as the previous chapter points out, there were also other two religions prevailed in the 1440s northwest Sichuan: Bön and Tibetan Buddhism, and their followers were in constant and intense competition. Facing such a situation, the Ming, granted more support to the Tibetan Buddhist monks with the purpose of checking Dongbuhanhu clique.

In 1440, the Ming dispatched a translator to Songpan to investigate the charged situation on the ground between Bön and Tibetan Buddhist communities. When he returned, he filed a report with the court. In the report he pointed out that the Bön followers led by State Preceptor (國師) Zhangpa Lodrö Gyaltsen and the Tibetan Buddhists led by meditation Master (禪師) Chörin had been engaged in fierce conflicts for a long time. Hence, the Ming should take action to ease the tension.[287] Only two weeks after receiving the report, the Ming court made a swift decision to upgrade Chörin, the Tibetan Buddhist leader, from Buddhist master to State Preceptor.[288] By doing this while the Bön master was happened to be at the Ming court, the Ming conveyed a clear signal: the empire now recognized Tibetan Buddhism in northwest Sichuan as high as Bön in terms of religious status and importance.

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[287] Sperling, "Tibetan Buddhism, Perceived and Imagined, along the Ming-Era Sino-Tibetan Frontier,"170.
[288] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 408.

It is in this context that the Ming set up the second Buddhist Registry in Songpan. In 1441, roughly around the same time when Chörin was promoted to state preceptor, the Ming announced the establishment of the second Prefectural Buddhist Registry in Songpan, the Prefectural Buddhist Registry of Songpan Guard (松潘衛僧綱司).[289] But unlike the one in Dabei Monastery where Chinese Buddhists without local roots took charge, the new office was established for an indigenous religious leader, Sangerzhe Xianjie (桑兒者先結), who had provided military information and local guidance to the Ming troops.[290] Unlike Yueguang and Zhizhong, Sangerzhe Xianjie was a practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism. But similar to the relationship of Yueguang and Yonten Zangpo, he had one disciple named Zhang Heshang (長和尚), who was very possibly an ethnic-Han judging from his name. One could even speculate that this Zhang Heshang was the translator for Sangerzhe Xianjie's interaction with the Ming military. As the Ming granted seals and imperial edicts that legitimized Sangerzhe Xianjie's clerical position, the indigenous leader was also permitted to build a monastery and govern fellow Buddhists on his own.[291]

Tibetan Buddhism in Songpan, as this section has demonstrated, was not always popular and powerful in the highland region. It is only around the 1440s that Tibetan Buddhist groups in the region began to gain more support from Ming China as higher ranks of titles were granted and new institutions created. The purpose of these actions was to uplift Tibetan Buddhism to check the powerful Bön communities. Tibetan Buddhism's further development in the region, as the next sections will show, only came later with the Ming court's support as the major incentive.

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[289] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 403.
[290] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 403.
[291] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 403.

The Ethnic Features and Institutional Affiliations of Tibetan Buddhist Communities in the Highland

Within ten years, the Ming had set up two Prefectural Buddhist Registries in Songpan, indicating the empire's intention to wield religion to govern its frontier. The reasons for establishing the two institutions were unquestionably different. But do they have other differences and similarities? And more importantly, what can they tell us about the religious landscape of the highland as a whole?

In terms of similarities, the ethnic hybridity of both Songpan Buddhist Registries allows for an investigation of how the correlation between religion and ethnicity was perceived in the early 15th century highland. Some people would probably feel confused when they learn that the non-Han highland local Yonten Zangpo would take an ethnic-Han Buddhist monk such as Yueguang as master to learn Chinese Buddhism. From a modern-day perspective, this might seem quite strange as many people tend to presume that Tibetan Buddhism was intrinsic to the ethnic Tibetans.[292] But in the early 15th century, religion transcended both ethnic and linguistic boundaries. As Hoong Teik Toh reminds us, "a 'Tibetan monk' or a lama in the Ming period could refer to any Buddhist monk who practiced Tibetan Buddhism regardless of his actual ethnicity."[293] One's Buddhist training did not have correlate with his ethnicity. Buddhist officials' appointments followed a similar logic. In the ethnic regard, at Songpan we have cases that Han Buddhist monks from Zhejiang, Ming China's coastal area, were appointed to a position in the empire's outmost west region where the ethnic Fan were the majority. In the religious regard, elsewhere we also

[292] Gray Tuttle's paper treats ethnic Han people converting to Tibetan Buddhism as something unusual in Communist China, however, this is not the case during 15th century Ming. See Tuttle, "An Unknown Tradition of Han Chinese Conversion to Tibetan Buddhism: Han Chinese Incarnate Lamas and Parishoners of Tibetan Buddhist Temples in Amdo."
[293] Toh, "Tibetan Buddhism in Ming China," 205.

have examples that a northwest native Tibetan Buddhist monk was named the Prefectural Buddhist Superior of Suzhou (蘇州),[294] a place that has always been, to my knowledge, a stronghold of Chinese Buddhism. What these seemingly strange imperial orders precisely point out is that the early 15th century Ming court did not necessarily assume a correspondence between religion and ethnicity. It is highly possible that for Ming emperors at the time, the two religions were after all both Buddhist branches, and thus there was no need to take their distinctions too seriously. From the Ming court's viewpoint, as long as the religious official was competent, his ethnicity or religious denomination would not pose any obstacle. Projecting modern-day views into pre-modern scenarios is ahistorical.

In contrast, what really differentiates the two Songpan Buddhist Registries were their different positions in the Ming bureaucratic system: they corresponded to two types of officials that the Ming usually set up in frontier regions. Those who were transferred to a highland office from the Chinese heartland should be understood as Ming China's *liuguan* (rotating officialdom 流官), while those indigenous religious leaders fall into the category of *tuguan* (native officialdom 土官). Compared with *tuguan*, *liuguan* was a relatively common title by the Ming's standard. They were the empire's regular bureaucrats who usually received systematic training before being assigned to specific institutional positions. A civil official in this meritocracy, for example, required years of learning Confucian classics and success in the laborious civil examination system. A military or religious official was expected to meet certain criteria and pass evaluations as well. In a certain sense, *liuguan* were institutionally closer to the Ming's imperial apparatus. Judging from Yueguang and Zhizhong's

[294] Jing, *Wanli Lintao Fuzhi*, juan 22, "zaji."

professional traits, they were definitely *liuguan* at Songpan, and this is precisely why the contemporaries designated their institution at Dabei Monastery as the "inner Buddhist Registry" (內僧司), which conveys a sense of belonging and direct governance under the Ming.[295]

As the designation of "inner Buddhist Registry" implies otherwise, the second Buddhist Registry was relatively distant from the Ming's imperial apparatus: it falls into the *tuguan* category. *Tuguan*, or native officialdom, was a Ming bureaucratic title passed down from the Yuan dynasty. But unlike the Yuan dynasty during which such offices were considered as part of the standard bureaucracy, the Ming separated the category from the regularly appointed officials,[296] and only set up *tuguan* positions in non-Han areas along the empire's frontiers or certain inland mountainous regions occupied by non-Han groups. Therefore, *tuguan* were not required to go through the Ming's meritocratic examinations, and their position and power were mainly hereditary. Because of its somewhat autonomous nature, *tuguan* were usually granted power to preside over their own subjects, constituting what John Herman called "dual sovereignty in the internal frontier."[297] The indigenous religious leaders in Songpan met precisely these criteria. Ming texts dedicate less than 100 characters to Sangerzhe Xianjie and the second Songpan Buddhist registry, pointing to a tenuous relationship between this religious institution and the Ming's normal bureaucratic structure. In addition, the fact that Ming records never specify this office's location speaks exactly to its nature as an institute quite beyond the Ming's direct reach.

Coexisting as parallel offices, the two Songpan Buddhist Registries served the Ming's frontier policies well in their initial implementations. This situation was not

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[295] Wang, *Jiaqing Pengxian Zhi*, juan42, 62a.
[296] Herman, *Amid the Clouds and Mist*, 105.
[297] Herman, *Amid the Clouds and Mist*, 105.

unique in Songpan. From the late 14th to the mid-15th century, such juxtapositions prevailed in many places in the highland region (Table 4.1-4.4). But the relationship between the two offices varied in different places. In Songpan for example, the function of the two Buddhist Registries was differentiated along a jurisdictional line. While the first office, Prefectural Buddhist Registry of Civilian & Military Guard Commands of Songpan and its Vicinity (松潘等處軍民指揮使司僧綱司) would be partially affiliated with the region's civil affair system, the second office, Prefectural Buddhist Registry of Songpan Guard, was under the military's direct administration. Such a division also existed in Taozhou. In other places like Hezhou and Minzhou, the two offices were divided by religious denomination and designated as Prefectural Buddhist Registry of Chinese Monks (漢僧僧綱司) and Prefectural Buddhist Registry of Tibetan Monks (番僧僧綱司). Similar divisions existed in Ningxia and Turpan as well.[298] By 1440, the dual-track Buddhist Registries were set up in Hezhou, Minzhou, Taozhou and Songpan parts of the highland, as is shown in Table. 4.1 to 4.4:

	Prefectural Buddhist Registry of Hezhou Hanseng河州漢僧綱司 (1393)	Prefectural Buddhist Registry of Hezhou fanseng 河州番僧綱司 (1393)
Buddhist Denomination	Han Buddhism	Tibetan Buddhism
Institutional Feature	Rotating Officialdom	Native Officialdom

Table. 4.1: Dual Track of Clerical Bureaucracy in Hezhou (河州)[299]

	Prefectural Buddhist Registry of Minzhou Hanseng岷州漢僧綱司(1428)	Prefectural Buddhist Registry of Minzhou fanseng 岷州番僧綱司(1429)
Buddhist Denomination	Han Buddhism	Tibetan Buddhism
Institutional Feature	Rotating Officialdom	Native Officialdom

[298] Bai, "Mingqing de Fanseng Senggangsi Shulue," 135.

[299] This office was set up in the Hezhou Guard City, just like the one in Dabei Monastery of Songpan, and thus I define it as an office for court clergy. See Wang, *Hezhou Zhi Jiaozhu*，106. For more information on this office and the lineage of the registry Superior, see Yue and Du, "Mingqing Shiqi Hezhou Diqu Zangzu Zhengjiao Shijia Hanshi."

Table. 4.2: Dual Track of Clerical Bureaucracy in Minzhou (岷州) [300]

	Prefectural Buddhist Registry of Songpan dengchu junmin zhihuishi si (松潘等處軍民指揮使司僧綱司) (1431)	Prefectural Buddhist Registry of Songpan wei (松潘衛僧綱司) (1441)
Buddhist Denomination	Han Buddhism	Tibetan Buddhism
Institutional Feature	Rotating Officialdom	Native Officialdom

Table. 4.3: Dual Track of Clerical Bureaucracy in Songpan (松潘)

	Prefectural Buddhist Registry of Taozhou wei junmin zhihuishi si (洮州衛軍民指揮使司僧綱司) (1427)	Prefectural Buddhist Registry of Songpan wei (洮州衛僧綱司) (1440)
Buddhist Denomination	Tibetan Buddhism	Tibetan Buddhism
Institutional Feature	Native Officialdom	Native Officialdom

Table. 4.4: Dual Track of Clerical Bureaucracy in Taozhou (洮州)[301]

One can see from these religious offices that although Tibetan Buddhism tended to be more well-received in certain regions, in general there were no overly unbalanced power dynamics between Chinese Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism by the 1440s. Yet things started to change from then on, especially with the intervention of the Ming court. While the development of Tibetan Buddhism in mid-15th century northwest Sichuan was devised specifically for the purpose of checking the Bön forces, Bön did not prevail in the entire highland. In most parts of the region, the

[300] The Prefectural Buddhist Registry of Minzhou Hanseng was established in Guangfu Monastery (Vast Blessing Monastry 廣福寺). The monastery was built sometime between 1426 to 1428 by the Ming prince of Han (韓王), who just moved from Kaiyuan (開原) in northeast to Pingliang (平涼) in northwest in 1425. Tibetan Buddhism was not popular in northeast China until the rise of the Manchus in the early 17th century. it was less likely for Prince Han to be attracted to Tibetan Buddhism either in Kaiyuan or in the short time since his settlement in Pingliang. Therefore, Guangfu Monastery should be a Han Buddhism monastery. For Guangfu Monastry's location, see Minxianzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui bangongshi, *Minzhou Zhi Jiaozhu*, 104. For Prince Han's movement to Pingliang, see *Ming xuanzong shilu*, juan 19, 1st year, month VII, gengxu. For the construction of Guangfu Monastery, see *Taozhou lishi jiapu,* 59. The Prefectural Buddhist Registry of Minzhou Hanseng was set up in Dachongjiao Monastery, which will be examined in the following section.

[301] Prefectural Buddhist Registry of Songpan wei (洮州衛僧綱司) was set up in 1427, and Prefectural Buddhist Registry of Taozhou wei junmin zhihuishi si (洮州衛軍民指揮使司僧綱司) was established in 1440. Both offices were led by Tibetan Buddhist monks who were also recognized as indigenous clergy. In fact, there were in total 5 Prefectural Buddhist Registries in Taozhou during the Ming dynasty, and they were all controlled by indigenous clergy who practiced Tibetan Buddhism. For details, see Wu, "Mingdai Taozhou Wei Senggangsi Yanjiu."

spread of Tibetan Buddhism was facilitated by a series of privileges granted by several mid-15th century Ming emperors out of personal interest in the religion.

Religion and Lineage: The Case of Minzhou

One question left unanswered from the Songpan case is which of the two offices was more well-received on the ground. In hindsight, it was the native officialdom. Although after Zhizhong's retirement, his two successors, Yonten Zangpo and Zichang, were also credited for being recognized as competent clergy by the indigenes and capable frontier officials by the Ming,[302] their contemporaries did not remember further Songpan court clergy after 1470s. However, one should not quickly reduce such a diminished influence to an ethnocultural-essentialist explanation. It could be ahistorical to assume that mid-Ming ethnic Tibetans would naturally choose Tibetan Buddhism over Chinese Buddhism simply because they were Tibetan. The following two sections argue that a series of Ming policies in the mid-15th century extensively contributed to the development and flourishing of Tibetan Buddhism in the highland. Through two more case studies, the following sections historicize a process in which Tibetan Buddhism outweighed Han Buddhism because of specific institutional causes. In this regard, it was the Ming itself that made the *liuguan*'s work harder and harder, but not an inherent ethnoreligious Tibetan force built in the highland.

The Ming court's patronage of Tibetan Buddhism has received considerable scholarly attention in recent years. Reexamining conventional narratives about the Ming court's lack of religious engagement, scholars argue that Tibetan Buddhism retained its privilege after the Yuan-Ming dynastic transition and was of particular

[302] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 645.

importance during the Ming at least before the 16th century.[303] But in these revisionist works, most attention has been given to the reigns of Emperor Hongwu and Yongle, leaving the court's engagement of Tibetan Buddhism in the mid- to late 15th century largely untouched.[304] In fact, Ming emperors in this period, including Emperor Xuande, Zhengtong, Jingtai, and Chenghua, all devoted tremendous passion to Tibetan Buddhism, if not as fully-fledged practitioners.[305] They frequently invited Tibetan Buddhists to court for religious affairs, and many of these Tibetan Buddhist hierarchs in fact came from the highland region.

Tibetan Buddhism was present in the Ming capital from the dynasty's beginnings, yet its prosperity began in the early 15th century. During the 1430s, three strongholds of Tibetan Buddhism gradually took shape in Beijing, and they each were favored by a specific Tibetan Buddhist sect: Geluk sect monks tended to station at Daci'en Monastery (大慈恩寺); Kagyu sect monks usually stayed at Dalongshan Monastery (大隆善寺); and Da'nengren Monastery (大能仁寺) was always preferred by Sakya sect monks.[306] What is worth particular attention here is that all three monasteries had strong connections with Tibetan Buddhists from the highland region. The leader of Daci'en Monastery, *Daci Fawang* Shakya Yeshe (大慈法王釋迦也失), was buried in Hezhou, and thereafter many Geluk monks from the highland began to travel to the Ming court frequently.[307] Dalongshan Monastery was where *Dazhi Fawang* Penden Trashi (大智法王班丹扎釋) and his disciples stationed, and Penden Trashi himself

[303] Robinson, "The Ming Court and the Legacy of the Yuan Mongols," in Robinson, *Culture, Courtiers, and Competition: The Ming Court (1368-1644)*, 371-382
[304] Yet the interaction in this period should never be underestimated. Marsha Weidner, from the perspective of art history, has uncovered the extensive patronage of Emperor Chenghua over Tibetan Thangkas production. But more scholarship is needed before a full picture is drawn. Weidner, "Beyond Yongle: Tibeto-Chinese Thangkas for the Mid-Ming Court."
[305] He, "Mingdai Huangdi Chongfeng Zangchuan Fojiao Qianxi."
[306] Du, "Mingdai Zangseng Zhujing de Sanda Siyuan Kaoshu: Jianlun Jiaopai Secai Yu Famai Chuancheng."
[307] An, "Daci Fawang Shijia Yeshi Liangci Jinjing Xiangguan Shishi Xinzheng."

was a Minzhou native. Da'nengren Monastery, similarly, was controlled by indigenous clergy from the highland, specifically from Baota Monastery (寶塔寺) of Lintao (臨洮), where a native monk Dondrup Rinchen was the first to establish authority at the Da'nengren Monastery and acquire the title of *Damin fawang* (大敏法王).[308] In this vein, one can even say that the three monasteries had become the religious outposts of the highland Buddhist communities in Beijing.

Having established religious bases in the Ming capital, Tibetan Buddhists from the highland had the chance to build networks at court and even developed direct contact with the Ming throne. Some of them frequently hosted religious ceremonies and gave Dharma teachings for the Ming elites, and many others were hired to translate Buddhist cannons specifically for court use.[309] Meanwhile, from the 1430s, the Tibetan Buddhists were allowed to stay in Beijing for quite a long time without any limit on their stay.[310] As a result, many of these special treatments from the Ming court were subsequently used by the highland Tibetan Buddhist monks to accumulate political capital and gain religious authority.

As more and more Tibetan Buddhist monks enjoyed privileges at the Ming court, they began to project this power back to the highland society. In this process, the monks' personal connections in local society, especially blood ties, often played an important role. One can even say that these Tibetan Buddhists' local networks functioned as irrigation canals that transported nutriments for the development of Tibetan Buddhism on the ground.

The case of *Dazhi Fawang* Penden Trashi and the spread of Tibetan Buddhism in Minzhou effectively illustrates how the religion took root in the highland society

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[308] Du, "Mingdai Lintao Baotasi Jiqi Fawang Shishi Kaoshu: Mingdai Baotasi Baoen Chuanliu Bei Jianshi."
[309] An, *Mingdai Hanyi Zangchuan Mijiao Wenxian Yanjiu*.
[310] *Mingshi*, juan 331, "xiyu."

through genealogical connections. Born in rural Minzhou (岷州 modern-day 岷縣) in 1377 from the Hou (后) Lineage and ordained a monk at the age of 13, Penden Trashi's life changed for good when he was invited to the Ming court in 1405 to prepare for the reception of Dezhin Shekpa, the fifth Karmapa of Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism.[311] In 1406, Penden Trashi was dispatched to Tibet to greet Dezhin Shekpa and accompanied him all the way back to the Ming capital.[312] From then on, Penden Trashi played an active role in the religious diplomacy between Ming and Tibet. He served as a middleman who brought numerous Buddhist statues and scriptures to Tibetan hierarchs and delivered their requests and concerns back to the Ming court. In 1423, Penden Trashi was dispatched to Tibet to inspect the authenticity of the reincarnation of Dezhin Shekpa.[313] Because of this successful mission, he was promoted to Grand State Preceptor (大国师) and relocated to Dalongshan Monastery, which later became the central base for Minzhou Tibetan Buddhists in Beijing.[314]

After the trip to Tibet in 1423, Panden Trashi spent most of his time in Dalongshan Monastery in Beijing. It was also during this period that he fostered an intimate relationship with Emperor Xuande. Emperor Xuande's interest in Tibetan Buddhism has never been systematically examined in the scholarship of any language, but he was most likely a devoted Tibetan Buddhist practitioner. He frequently attended Penden Traishi's Dharma instructions and ritual ceremonies, and he asked Penden Trashi to translate Buddhist sutras solely for his private use.[315] In 1428, Penden Trashi

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[311] Zhang, *Xitian Fozi Yuanliu Lu: Wenxian Yu Chubu Yanjiu*, 163.
[312] For Emperor Yongle's meeting with Dezhin Shekpa, Peter Schwieger, based on the writing of a Karmapa's retainer, argues that Yongle's ultimate goal to invite Dezhin Shekpa was to install a patron-priest relationship with the Kakyu school, a direct copy of the Yuan model in which the Mongols patronized the Sakya leaders. Schwieger, *The Dalai Lama the Emperor of China*, 21-22.
[313] Zhang, *Xitian Fozi Yuanliu Lu: Wenxian Yu Chubu Yanjiu*, 171-172.
[314] Zhang, *Xitian Fozi Yuanliu Lu: Wenxian Yu Chubu Yanjiu*, 174.
[315] Zhang, *Xitian Fozi Yuanliu Lu: Wenxian Yu Chubu Yanjiu*, 176-179.

conducted a grand-wheel empowerment and an Amitāyus empowerment for Emperor Xuande.[316] From a religious perspective, this means that the emperor had officially acknowledged Penden Trashi's mentorship and was willing to follow his Dharma instructions. In 1435, Penden Trashi's disciples in Beijing made him a statue. In the stele inscription of the statue, he was juxtaposed with Po-Śrīmitra, Vajrabodhi and Amoghavajra, all eminent Indian monks who had brought Buddhist knowledge to China.[317] It is clear that in the 1430s, Penden Trashi already held extensive influence at the Ming court.

Upon securing his position in the Ming capital, Penden Trashi began to extend his religious authority and political power back into the highland society. In 1431, he sent a Dharma edict (法旨) to his disciples at Dachongjiao Monastery (大崇教寺) in Minzhou. Only recently discovered in rural Gansu, the Dharma edict was issued by Penden Trashi as instructions for abbotship succession in Dachongjiao Monastery. Built in 1417 under Penden Trashi's order,[318] Dachongjiao Monastery was expanded in 1427 with the Ming court's financial and labor support.[319] But when Penden Trashi found out he was too busy for the daily management of the monastery, he issued the Dharma edict in 1431 and passed the abbotship to his disciple, Śākya Śrī Palzangpo. However, in the same Dharma edict, Penden Trashi also appointed his own nephew, Chödrup Zangpo, to be the next monastery abbot after Śākya Śrī Pel Zangpo. Such a way of appointing successors created friction between the two candidates. When the tension between the two successors was too intense to mediate, Penden Trashi issued

[316] Zhiguanba Gongquehu danba raoji, *Anduo Zhengjiaoshi*, 642.
[317] Beijing tushuguan jinshizu, *Beijing Tushuguan Cang Zhongguo Lidai Shike Tapian Huibian*, vol. 51, 79.
[318] Zhang, *Xitian Fozi Yuanliu Lu: Wenxian Yu Chubu Yanjiu*, 171
[319] Ouyang, *Ouyang de Ji*, 411.

a second Dharma edict in 1449 and announced a verdict of property division between the two.[320]

One may think that Penden Trashi's appointing two generations of successors at one time was not a smart move to maintain stability in Dachongjiao Monastery. But I argue this seemingly troublesome decision attests to Penden Trashi's intention to keep the control of Dachongjiao Monastery in the hands of his own lineage members. In this vein, what the Dharma edicts indicate is a shifting pattern of abbotship transmission from master-disciple succession to blood succession, and in this specific case, between uncle and nephew. In a broader context, retaining secular and religious authorities within the lineage was a common strategy for powerful northwest non-Han households to build local influence, and it proved quite effective in areas with a large Tibetan Buddhist population.[321] As one of Penden Trashi's most important religious achievements in Minzhou, Dachongjiao Monastery was not something the monk was willing to give away to non-lineage members, even to his own disciple.

Chödrup Zangpo, Penden Trashi's nephew, became the abbot of Dachongjiao Monastery in 1449. From then on, we see a gradual convergence between religious privilege and lineage authority in Minzhou. This trend drastically shaped the power structure of local society in which influential lineages became more and more visible in the religious arena. In my fieldwork in the region from 2017 to 2019, I found that 16 monasteries I investigated were constructed during the Ming, and they all preserved either paper documents or historical memory of the lineage of the monastery abbot. The details are shown in Table. 4.5:

[320] Li and Zhouta, "Xin Faxian de Liangjian Bandan Zhashi Fazhi Ji Xiangguan Shishi Kaoshu."
[321] For examples, see Zhang, "Gansu Qinghai Tusizhi."

Name of the Monastery	Surname of the Abbot	Construction time	Name of the Monastery	Surname of the Abbot	Construction time
Chonglong/ Lang Si	Hou (后)		Yangjuan/Yangjia Si	Yang (楊)	Ming
Qianchuan/ Xieduoer Si	Hou		Yongan/Yangjia Si	Yang	
Dachongjiao Si	Hou	1417	Yongning Si	Bao (包)	Ming
Hongjiao/Dazhan Si	Hou	Ming	Sanzhu/Elu Si	Bao	Ming
Yuanjue Si	Hou	Ming	Guangde/Qijia Si	Qi (祁)	Ming (Hongwu)
Cangjing Si	Chang (常)		Hongfu Si	Qi (漆)	Ming
Gongbu Si	Chang		Shiya Si	Jin (金)	Ming
Chaoding Si	Chang		Fazang Si	Ding (丁)	

Table. 4.5: Minzhou Tributary Monasteries and Family Background of Abbots

As the table indicates, five out of the sixteen monasteries belonged to the Hou lineage. That is not surprising considering the fact that the Hou lineage was the family from which Penden Trashi came. In fact, the Hou lineage should have controlled more monasteries in the Ming because many monasteries originally owned by them were sold to or taken by other lineages later. For example, Gongbu Monastery, whose abbot bore the surname of Chang according to survey results, only began to associate with the Chang lineage from the early Qing dynasty. According to a Qing dynasty contract, it was originally a Hou lineage property built on a piece of land that Penden Trashi purchased.[322] Other monasteries, such as Fazang Monastery, should also have belonged to the *Hou* lineage as it was only given to Śākya Śrī Palzangpo in 1449.[323] Since many Tibetan Buddhist monasteries simultaneously functioned as political arbitrators, religious mentors, estate managers, taxation collectors, and corvée

[322] Li, "Hanzang Jiaorong: Mingqing Shiqi Minzhou Zangchuan Fojiaoshi Yanjiu," 159.
[323] Li and Zhouta, "Xin Faxian de Liangjian Bandan Zhashi Fazhi Ji Xiangguan Shishi Kaoshu."

enforcements, it is quite reasonable to speculate that the Hou lineage was the biggest landlord in Ming dynasty Minzhou.[324]

The mutual reinforcement of religious and lineage organizations was quite common in the highland society. It was also the case in Taozhou, as all five Taozhou indigenous cleric offices were associated with and hereditary within privileged lineages.[325] This poses an interesting contrast with what was concurrently happening in Central Tibet. As Peter Schweiger suggests, in 15th-century central Tibet, "the degree to which individual aristocratic families were able to influence monastic affairs was weakened, as was the dependence on the political and economic fate of a single family."[326] But in the highland region, monastery-based networks overlapped with the lineage-based social web. This convergence exemplified a Tibetan-style rulership that featured the unity of religious and lay authority, rendering Minzhou a society heavily charged with religious domination.

As the religious-genealogical organization in Minzhou rose to power, its relationship with two other social groups in the local society, the Ming military and Chinese Buddhist communities, also changed. Chapter 1 has already indicated how the Ming military built many fortresses intentionally near Tibetan Buddhist monasteries as a way to oversee non-Han dwellers and prevent possible rebellions. But the situation started to change as the Tibetan Buddhist communities grew stronger. As early as in 1429, one of the Hou lineage members was already using Penden Trashi's rising status at court as support to reclaim land and estates in Minzhou that were taken away by the local Ming military earlier.[327] The changing

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[324] Nietupski, *Labrang Monastery: A Tibetan Buddhist Community on the Inner Asian Borderlands, 1709-1958*, 53-113.
[325] Wu, "Mingdai Taozhou Wei Senggangsi Yanjiu."
[326] Schwieger, *The Dalai Lama the Emperor of China*, 23.
[327] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 262.

power dynamic is most typically indicated through the location of newly constructed Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in Minzhou. Fig. 4.1 indicates the spatial pattern of the military infrastructure in Minzhou. As is shown, the Minzhou guard itself sat on the intersection of the U-shape Min River and the Diezang River that runs southeast to northwest, while other fortresses were scattered upstream of the Min River and the Diezang River, indicating a strategic concern that protected Minzhou from possible attack from the west. But the distribution of Minzhou monasteries demonstrates a different pattern. From Fig. 4.2, it is clear that many monasteries were located downstream of the Min River. Considering that most of the military stations were constructed in the early Ming, prior to the religious sites, we may infer that the monks intentionally chose regions with weaker military presence for religious expansion in order to bypass the military's surveillance. To keep their distance from the Chinese military forces, even far-off and underpopulated regions such as Lü jing (閭井), a steppe region with a relatively high altitude of 2600 meters highlighted in the Map, had become fertile soil for the monks to spread Dharma seeds.

Fig. 4.1: Military Forts in Minzhou

Fig. 4.2: Tibetan Buddhist Monasteries in Minzhou

Tibetan Buddhist communities' relationship with the Chinese Buddhist groups also changed as the former grew stronger. In 1428 and 1429, two Prefectural Buddhist Registries of Chinese Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism were established in Minzhou. The registry for Chinese Buddhism was built and backed by the Ming prince of Han (韓王), meaning that the clerk and staff in the princely palace constituted a great proportion of the local Chinese Buddhist community. However, by at least 1441, the Minzhou Chinese Buddhist registry had already been recorded as a Tibetan Buddhist registry in Ming court documents with its Buddhist clergy showing up in Beijing as a tributary monk.[328] And the next year, the position of Prefectural Buddhist Superior was given by a Chinese Buddhist to a Tibetan Buddhist monk.[329]

A similar situation in which Chinese Buddhists converted to Tibetan Buddhism is also typically indicated in the case of Chongfu Monastery (崇福寺). Located in

[328] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 75, 6th year, month I, renxu.
[329] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 91, 7th year, month, IX, yisi.

modern-day Dingxi (定西), a county not far from Minzhou, Chongfu Monastery was an ancient yet dilapidated Chinese Buddhist complex. During the Hongwu reign, a Chinese Buddhist named Liaorang (了让) started to rebuild the monastery. Later the job was passed down to Liaorang's disciple, Wumao (悟瑁), an ethnic Han surnamed Kang.[330] At first, Wumao relied on public donations to collect funding for monastery construction. But this proved to be a slow and inefficient fundraising channel. Therefore, Wumao began to make money by himself. Skilled at calligraphy, Wumao hired himself out to copy Buddhist sutras for others and gradually won renown for this work. From then on, not only social elites in the area, but also high-level patrons in Beijing and Nanjing started to invite Wumao to copy sutras for them. Devoting himself to his master's unfinished work, Wumao kept pouring the remuneration he received from his hard labor into the welfare of the monastery. From 1432 to 1444, he gradually repaired old Buddhist halls or built new ones for the monastery, and such an effort was highly praised in the local society. Yet in 1447, in one of his memorials to the court, Wumao claimed Chongfu Monastery to be the sub-monastery of Dachongjiao Monastery, and he himself the disciple of Penden Trashi.[331] Because of this new identity, the Ming court issued imperial edicts to the monastery and an ivory seal to Wumao.[332]

Some people might find it reasonable to call Wumao a traitor. After all, he deserted the Dharma lineage of his Chinese Buddhist master, re-submitted to a Tibetan Buddhist master, adopted a Tibetan name as Yeshe Dondrup, and even converted a Chinese Buddhist monastery into a Tibetan Buddhist one. But I argue that what

[330] Zhengxie dingxi shi andingqu weiyuanhui, *Chongxiu Dingxi Xianzhi Jiaozhu*, 379.
[331] Zhengxie dingxi shi andingqu weiyuanhui, *Chongxiu Dingxi Xianzhi Jiaozhu*, 396-397.
[332] Zhengxie dingxi shi andingqu weiyuanhui, *Chongxiu Dingxi Xianzhi Jiaozhu*, 397.

Wumao did, though controversial, was for the best of the monastery and its dependents. The time when Wumao subordinated himself and the monastery to Tibetan Buddhism was the time that Pendan Trashi and Dachongjiao Monastery were at their peak. The privileges and preferential policies, not to mention wealth they received from the Ming court, were enormous, and it is wise for Wumao, whose monastery was merely 100 miles away from Dachongjiao Monastery, to conform to the trend of the times by joining them and thus prospering together.

This section, through a case study of Minzhou, portrays how Tibetan Buddhism was able to penetrate deep into highland society via certain Tibetan Buddhist monks' local connections. Chinese Buddhist monks, in contrast, did not enjoy such advantages, and many of them even converted to Tibetan Buddhism in pursuit of a better living. In this regard, I argue that the increasingly wide discrepancy between the two groups' divergent paths derived from social factors, not ethnocultural causes. The next section, along a similar line, will illustrate how institutional factors such as legal privileges further contribute to the development of Tibetan Buddhism in the highland.

Spreading the Dharma Seeds: The Case of Wondering Monks

Lineage networks were important vehicles for Tibetan Buddhism to spread in the highland. However, other privileges granted by the mid-15th century Ming court also enabled Tibetan Buddhism to gradually outgrow Chinese Buddhism. Unrestrained preaching activities, exemption from Ming law, and imperial protections over monastic property all extensively contributed to these changing power dynamics. Similar to the previous section, this section will also rely on local materials to investigate the understudied historical process. The main focus will be on one group: itinerate monks.

Compared to other special treatments at court, the permission of free travel for Tibetan Buddhists seems to be rather trivial. But in the mid-15th century, this was a privilege given exclusively to the Tibetan Buddhists. Free travel by Chinese Buddhists, in contrast, was severely restricted.[333] Sanctioned by the Ming court as a privilege, Tibetan Buddhists from the highland could travel freely and stay in any monastery, be it Chinese Buddhist or Tibetan Buddhist, for Dharma practice. Numerous indigenous clergy brought such demands to the Ming court, and many were allowed to dwell in Chinese Buddhist monasteries in and near the highland,[334] resulting in the spread of Tibetan Buddhism over a wider geographical area.

While the primary sources do not offer enough detail for a full scan of how such "visiting monk" programs worked and what their religious lives were like in those stationing monasteries, it is certain that many Tibetan Buddhist monks were quite interested in monasteries with rich religious backgrounds which for some reason were damaged or long abandoned. For such monasteries, the wandering monk would just occupy the space, repair the buildings, and then claim to be the monastery's new host. What they gained in return was enormous political and economic capital. By restoring the religious complex, the monk could acquire not only fame and followers, but also wealth, influence, and authority.

One example of Faquan Monastery (白銀法泉寺) in modern-day Baiying of Gansu indicates how such processes took place. As a famous religious complex dating back to the Song dynasty, Faquan Monastery was largely ruined during the turbulent Yuan-Ming transition. In 1439, one Tibetan Buddhist monk named Shakya Penden

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[333] Guo, "Lizheng Shangyou: Mingdai Sengren de Youfang Huodong," 32.
[334] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 431. Also see *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 103, 8th year, month IV, gengzi. *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 164, 13th year, month III, jiachen. *Ming xiaozong shilu*, juan 186, 15th year, month IV, dingmao.

(桑迦班丹) came to the region and was immediately attracted by the place's natural environment and rich religious culture. Therefore, he decided to settle down and reconstruct the devastated monasteries. As Shakya Penden's renovation project kicked off, many ethnic Han officials and Buddhist practitioners contributed either financial or labor support, thus transforming the crumbling Faquan Monastery in a grandiose religious symbol of the region.[335] By hosting the restoration of Faquan Monastery, Shakya Penden accumulated much repute and religious authority in the region, and his disciples thereafter held the abbotships of Faquan and other local monasteries for nearly one hundred years.[336]

Some other materials not only point to how free travel enabled certain monks to spread Tibetan Buddhism, but also indicate how such preaching tours were tacitly sanctioned by the emperor even if they violated imperial law. One stone tablet in Jianfu Monastery in Xi'an (西安荐福寺) offers an interesting example. Located in modern-day central Xi'an and attracting thousands of tourists with its worldwide-famous Small Wild Goose Pagoda (小雁塔), Jianfu Monastery seems to have nothing to do with Tibetan Buddhism judging from the description in local gazetteers.[337] But one stele erected in the monastery tells us differently. The inscription on the stele records a conversation between Emperor Zhengtong and an official from the Ming's Ministry of Rites, and the dialog was centered around a Tibetan Buddhist's violation of imperial rites. The protagonist of the story is a certain monk named Chökyi Gyaltsen (勺思吉監參) who claimed to be a Tibetan Buddhist monk from the Hongjue Monastery of Xining Guard in Shaanxi (陕西西寧衛弘觉寺). The monk

[335] Wu, *Baiying Jinshi Jiaoshi*, 11.
[336] Baiyingshi difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui bangongshi, *Jingyuan Jiuzhi Jijiao*, 47.
[337] Shu, *Qianlong Xi'an Fuzhi*, 1308.

received his ordination certificate in 1426. But after that, instead of staying at Hongjue Monastery, he began to wander around the region, and eventually ended up at Jianfu Monastery, which was over 500 miles away from Xining. Being a time-honored ancient monastery notwithstanding, Jianfu Monastery was in a shabby state in the early 15th century. Therefore, the monk started to donate his own savings and raise additional funds for the monastery's reconstruction. It is unclear how long the repair work took, but in 1449 the monk sent a memorial to the Ming court to request a name for the monastery so that he could host Buddhist rituals appropriately. Along with the memorial, the monk also attached an architecture blueprint.[338]

Chökyi Gyaltsen must have never thought that the architecture blueprint he sent to the court could cause trouble. As soon as the emperor received the memorial, he found out from the monastic plan that the monk was using green-glazed tile (綠琉璃瓦) to decorate the Buddhist halls' roof, and immediately urged the officials from the Ministry of Rites to investigate.[339] This is mainly because of green-glazed-tile roof's symbolic meaning. It was a form of high-ranking architectural design used mainly for royal monuments, thus not something common people were allowed to use freely. Even within the Ming's ruling house, green-glazed tile was somewhat privileged. In 1443, when a Ming prince wished the court workshop to make some green-glazed tiles for his deceased mother's tomb, the emperor was unwilling to allow it and asked him to use black tiles instead.[340] Therefore, violating this type of imperial rite could be construed as an act of defiance against the throne and would result in severe consequences.

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[338] "Xi'an Jianfusi Zhengtong Shengzhi Bei."
[339] "Xi'an Jianfusi Zhengtong Shengzhi Bei."
[340] *Ming yingzong shilu*, juan 109, 8th year, month V, xinchou.

The official requested Chökyi Gyaltsen's immediate response after receiving the imperial edict. And the monk soon sent one. But according to the monk's defense, the green-glazed tiles were not something he personally chose. Jianfu Monastery was already a famous monastery in the Tang dynasty under the dynastic ruling house's patronage. Therefore, the green-glazed tiles were all Tang dynasty decorations and were part of the roof since the 10th century. What the Tibetan monk did was simply restore them. Confronting the throne was not his plan at all, and such justifications seemed reasonable. But still, the official declared the monk guilty for overtly violating imperial rites and suggested a punishment in his ensuing memorial.[341] Yet for the emperor, as soon as he realized that Chökyi Gyaltsen was not deliberately challenging his imperial authority, it became of less an issue. Therefore, he dropped the charge against the monk, officially recognized him as the abbot of the Jianfu Monastery, and granted him permission to host Buddhist rituals.[342] Although the historical material does not specify, it is highly possible that the emperor did not even ask the monk to remove all the green-glazed tiles.

Apart from indicating the breadth of the wandering monks' range of activity, the Jianfu Monastery case also demonstrates the degree to which Ming emperors were willing to indulge Tibetan Buddhists: even severe misdeeds that violated imperial rites could be pardoned, and whatever requests the misbehaving monk raised were all answered as if nothing happened. Another aspect that is worth particular analysis here is Chökyi Gyaltsen 's request for a monastery name, which in other occasions was described as plaque- or title-requesting (乞额/乞名). It is important to note that neither Faquan Monastery nor Jianfu Monastery were constructed under imperial

[341] "Xi'an Jianfusi Zhengtong Shengzhi Bei."
[342] "Xi'an Jianfusi Zhengtong Shengzhi Bei."

sanction. In other words, they were both constructed privately and thus, in a certain sense, illegally. In this regard, sending memorials for a court-bestowed plaque/title in this regard was not a superfluous gesture, but rather an important administrative procedure to legalize the monastery. That is why Chökyi Gyaltsen was so eager to have such a certificate from the court: the monk obviously did not want his monastery inside the walled city of Xi'an to be illegal. More importantly, such court-issued plaque/titles were often accompanied by an imperial edict that appoints as abbot the one who filed the request to be the monastery and recognizes his legal rights over monastic property. Therefore, rushing the registration of a monastery by requesting a court-issued plaque/title became a channel for certain Tibetan Buddhists to lay claim over others' religious complexes.

In Mt. Xumi of modern-day Guyuan (固原须彌山), there are two stone tablets inside a monastery called Yuanguang (圓光寺). The inscriptions on both stone tablets were carved in 1468, yet their contents are completely different and even contradict each other. The inscription on the first stone tablet is a 1443 memorial filed by a Tibetan Buddhist to the Ming court. According to the memorial, the monk Chökyi Wangchuk (綽吉旺速) was traveling in the region during Emperor Zhengtong's reign when he discovered the half-ruined Yuangguang Monastery. Feeling that the place was one with Buddha's blessing, Chökyi Wangchuk donated his personal savings and hired workers to repair the monastery. With all reconstruction work completed, Chökyi Wangchuk filed a report to the Ming court requesting a monastery plaque as well as an appointment as the abbot of the monastery. As the Ming court found the

requests reasonable, a plaque was bestowed, together with an imperial edict that named Chökyi Wangchuk as the monastery abbot.[343]

If this stone tablet was the only one preserved in Yuanguang Monastery nowadays, people might naturally believe that Chökyi Wangchuk was the legitimate religious leader of the monastery. Yet other stone tablets reveal a much more complicated picture. The inscription on the second stone tablet tells us a different story from Chökyi Wangchuk's version. It indicates that Yuanguang Monastery was already functioning before Chökyi Wangchuk's arrival. The monastery was founded by an ethnic Han Tibetan Buddhist named Gufeng (孤峰) during the Hongwu reign. Later, the abbotship was inherited by Dafang (大方), another ethnic Han monk, who most likely practiced Tibetan Buddhism as well. Dafang received his ordination certificate from the Ming court in 1440, and as he continued to hold the position as the monastery's abbot, he had many buildings in the monastery repaired or newly constructed. Obviously Dafang did not file a request to the Ming court for a monastery plaque until 1447, which is already four years after Chökyi Wangchuk made the same move.[344] One might suspect that there must be certain level of tension between Dafang and Chökyi Wangchuk as both of them claimed to be the abbot of the monastery, but it is a pity that the inscription does not reveal more information in this matter. However, I argue that Dafang's version of the story is most likely the more accurate one. On one hand, other stone tablets on Mt. Xumi also record Dafang's reconstruction work but never mention Chökyi Wangchuk's name;[345] on the other hand, the second stone tablet inscription demonstrates an undertone that redresses the injustice for Dafang, praising him for being virtuous yet humble while others were

[343] Xumishan shiku wenwu guanlisuo, *Xumishan Shiku Zhi,* 98-99.
[344] Xumishan shiku wenwu guanlisuo, *Xumishan Shiku Zhi,* 99.
[345] Xumishan shiku wenwu guanlisuo, *Xumishan Shiku Zhi,* 97.

using Buddhist affairs for private needs.[346] Such a narrative is quite rare considering the fact that it is carved in the inscription for a Buddhist monastery, and the way it quite strongly implies that Chökyi Wangchuk was the one who unethically took advantage of the policy of plaque/title requesting for his own benefit.

Even if Chökyi Wangchuk's actions were indeed motivated by private needs, it is understandable considering that there were also enormous economic benefits associated with the position he sought. In the mid-15th century highland, in common practice an imperial edict that clarified the abbot's guardianship over monastic property came along with the abbot appointment. The imperial edict granted to Yuanguang Monastery does not survive nowadays, but those granted to other Tibetan Monasteries in the highland might indicate how this mechanism worked.

By sorting out existing primary sources, I have found 17 Ming dynasty imperial edicts in total issued to monasteries in the highland in response to title/name requests.[347] Here I will use one issued to Zhaoci Monastery as an example to illustrate how such edicts functioned to insure the monastery financially.

The Zhaoci Monastery of Minzhou (岷州昭慈寺) received the imperial edict in 1448, one year before the Emperor Zhengtong learned about the green-glazed tile at Jianfu Monastery. The edict begins with the emperor's praise of Tibetan Buddhism for spreading good deeds among frontier inhabitants and for its ability to keep the region peaceful. Then, it introduces how the monastery abbot built the place for his disciples and raised the request for an imperial plaque, and grants it the name of "Zhaoci Monastery." The most important part of the imperial edict for our analysis is the third section. Here, the edict makes an explicit statement that no one is allowed to

[346] Xumishan shiku wenwu guanlisuo, *Xumishan Shiku Zhi,* 100.
[347] From Zhongguo zangxue zhongxin, *Yuan Yilai Xizang Difang Yu Zhongyang Zhengfu Guanxi Dangan Shiliao Huibian*.

disturb this religious community, and any invasion of the monastery's property—including buildings, lands, mountains, forests, gardens, material wealth, and various kinds of livestock—is strictly forbidden. Those who dared to make such disrespectful attempts would receive severe legal punishment.[348]

Many imperial edicts bestowed to monasteries in the highland include the same language which bestows their absolute rights over a wide array of property. For example, similar wording also appears in the imperial edict bestowed to Chökyi Wangchuk of the Yuanguang Monastery. And as far as I can tell, all such edicts were issued to Tibetan Buddhist monasteries. Meanwhile, 16 out of 17 imperial edicts I found were issued during the 15th century. This undoubtedly showcases the privilege that Ming emperors granted to the Tibetan Buddhist community. These imperial edicts functioned as legal umbrellas that rendered the monasteries immune to any type of infringement, which largely equals tax exemption. Such privileges constituted a form of autonomy that contrasted Tibetan Buddhist monasteries sharply with the Chinese Buddhist monasteries in the Ming heartland that were registered in the *lijia* system and thus had to take on tax and labor responsibilities.[349] In the highland region, as Paul Nietupski points out, the application of divine power to the physical realities of economics or territorial sovereignty were arguably very real.[350] With the imperial order's protection, Tibetan Buddhist monasteries had a comfortable nest in which to hatch and grow. Probably this is also why the hard-working Chinese Buddhist monk Wumao eventually chose to submit his monastery to Tibetan Buddhism: tax

[348] "Neige Daku Dang'an," No. 038110-001.
[349] Wang, *In the Wake of the Mongols: The Making of a New Social Order in North China, 1200-1600*, 220-221.
[350] Nietupski, "Understanding Sovereignty in Amdo." In Vitali, *Trails of the Tibetan Tradition: Papers for Elliot Sperling*, 222.

exemption was something Chinese Buddhist monasteries dared not to dream of, even in the 15th century when monastic policies were already relatively loose.[351]

Combining privileges from the Ming court with local connections, the Tibetan Buddhist monks converted the highland society into a Buddhist realm. As a result, Tibetan Buddhism blossomed in the region. During the Yuan dynasty, only 23 monasteries were built in northern Sichuan and Southern Gansu, but the number quadrupled to 95 newly built monasteries during the Ming.[352] Regarding the eastern Qinghai region, 45 and 131 monasteries were built in the Yuan and Ming respectively.[353] However, the overly favorable policies toward the highland Tibetan Buddhist communities and their extensive development gradually led to social turbulence in both the frontier region and the Ming capital, forcing the Ming to adjust its court policies in the late 15th century.

Prospering under the Ming Regulations

The Ming throne's patronage for Tibetan Buddhism was not unlimited. From the 1460s on, more and more court ministers began to pressure the Ming emperors by blaming Tibetan Buddhism for causing various types of social problems. This section examines how the Ming's regulation was effective in checking the popularity of Tibetan Buddhism in the Ming heartland, but counterproductive as it further stimulated the spread of the religion in the highland.

The Ming court's preferential policies in the mid-15th century enabled Tibetan Buddhism to spread at an unprecedented speed, thus causing social unrest for the Ming in both its frontier and capital regions. Thanks to the Ming emperor's sanction,

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[351] Gerritsen, "The Hongwu Legacy: Fifteenth-century Views on Zhu Yuanzhang's Monastic policies," in Schneewind, *Long Live the Emperor!: Uses of the Ming Founder across Six Centuries of East Asian History*, 62-69.
[352] Li, *Zangyi Zoulang Beibu Diqu Zangchuan Fojiao Siyuan Yanjiu,* 141-162.
[353] Zhu, "Qinghai Zangchuan Fojiao Lishi Wenhua Dili Yanjiu: Yi Siyuan Wei Zhongxin," 30-46.

Tibetan Buddhists were able to go to Beijing as tributary envoys with an increasing frequency. One Ming official recalled that while there were only 30 to 40 Tibetan Buddhist monks who visited the Ming court in the 1430s and 1440s, the number increased to 300 in the 1450s. By the late 1450s, every year 2,000 to 3,000 would come.[354] Such high frequency of travel to Beijing extensively promoted the popularity of Tibetan Buddhism in the highland, where the excessive return of the tributary trips exerted huge influence on the region's ethnic Han inhabitants. Many Han commoners, coveting the abundant material benefits, began to send their sons to learn to speak Tibetan so as to join the tributary groups as Tibetan Buddhist monks.[355] Others even abandoned their duties under the Ming's civilian and military household systems and faked Buddhist identities to join the groups.[356] This phenomenon echoes what Hoong Teik Toh calls the "increased Tibetanization" among Ming subjects, which refers to the fact that Han people made up an increasingly large proportion of the whole population of the Tibetan Buddhist monks.[357] But while Toh attributes such a phenomenon to the attractiveness of esotericism, in the highland, the Chinese's conversion was most likely driven by the desire for the lucrative potential of the trip to Beijing.

Various social problems emerged at the other end of the tributary route as well. While it was difficult for Han people in Beijing to sneak into the tributary embassies, they discovered other ways to benefit from the practice. One gruesome story indicates exactly how crazy the tributary practice had become. Among all the tribute items the highland monks brought along, there was one object called a Kapala bowl, which was a cup made from a human skull to use as a Tibetan Buddhist ritual implement. But

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[354] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 633.
[355] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 554.
[356] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 464.
[357] Toh, "Tibetan Buddhism in Ming China.", iii.

there were not enough skulls "produced" from the highland, a relatively sparsely populated region, to meet the great need of the large volume of tributary monks. Therefore, many Han civilians and military in the capital region began to ransack tombs, steal skulls, and sell them to the highland monks![358] It was precisely this type of social ramification that greatly annoyed Ming court ministers, who, for all their differences, were still Confucian scholars who could not tolerate behaviors violating their moral principles such as tomb-digging.

Because of the Ming throne's leaning toward Tibetan Buddhism, more and more highland monks came to Beijing, which even resulted in a shortage of translators at court.[359] Court officials began to criticize the frequent arrivals of Tibetan Buddhist embassies. They bitterly complained that the Tibetan monks had created too much trouble in both Beijing and the highland region. What made the court ministers worry even more was the monks' huge influence on the imperial ruling house, which could turn into cause political burdens or ideological issues.[360] Therefore, from the early years of the Chenghua reign (1464-1487), the court ministers started to press for reforms to control the tributary practice.

The main focus of the Chenghua reforms was on regulating the size of incoming Tibetan Buddhist groups so as to reduce the court's economic expenses. In hindsight, the tributary activities were indeed considerably checked by the series of reforms in the late 15th century. Ironically, these reforms also accelerated the spread of Tibetan Buddhism in the highland region, especially among the ethnic Han communities.

Among many reform agendas, one reform measure that deserves emphasis here was a restriction placed on the ethnic background of the tribute payers. In the eyes of

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[358] Yu, *Diangu Jiwen*, 278-279.
[359] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 666.
[360] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 668.

the Ming officials, there were unquestionably many unqualified tribute payers in the envoy groups, but who should be singled out became a question. In 1465, the Ming's Department of Ritual announced that "from the third year of Chenghua (1467), the tributary payers must be the same category of [the tributary group leader], and the total number cannot be too many."[361] But it was the term "category" (*lei* 類) here for which different parties held different definitions. From the late 15th century Ming officials' perspective, the concept of "category" meant ethnicity. Therefore, they proposed to draw a line that separated Han from non-Han within the Tibetan Buddhist community. One high official from the Ministry of Rites proposed that if the monk was an ethnic Tibetan, he could retain his religious identity but needed to be repatriated to his place of origin, but if he was ethnic Han, he was no more than a liar and thus should be forced to return to lay life and resume his tax-paying obligations.[362] What this proposal implies is that among the tribute monks from the highland, only ethnic Tibetans were deemed eligible as tribute payers, not those who were ethnic Han. They thought that the so-called Fan religion (番教) was something that belonged exclusively to the Fan people (番人), and Han people should not practice this alien religion. In this vein, ethnicity was necessarily a reference to categorize religion and also became the criteria to classify the highland Tibetan Buddhists. Such an emphasis on ethnicity, I argue, was likely tied to the xenophobic sentiment among the Han officials following the humiliating Tumu incident.

In contrast, the Tibetan Buddhists understood the operating "category" differently. They perceived it from a religious perspective: they thought that as long as the tribute payers were in the same Buddhist denomination as the embassy leader, they belonged

[361] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 634.
[362] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 668.

to one "category." From their point of view, "category" referred to one's religious background, and Buddhist denominations did not have to correlate with ethnicity. That is why when the Ming court ministers announced that more regulations would be imposed on the tributary groups starting from 1467, one Tibetan Buddhist leader immediately acquired as many as 3,400 ordination certificates in 1466 for his newly converted monks.[363] To him, as long as his followers received ordination certificates from the Ming court, a symbol of court recognition, they should be treated as someone who belonged to the same "category" with their leaders and thus be fine. To be fair, we cannot be sure how many among the 3400 licenses were given to ethnic-Han people. But I argue it is most likely that many of these licenses were given to the highland Han inhabitants who were desperate to acquire a Tibetan Buddhist identity in order to join the tributary missions, and it is from their court rewards that the Tibetan Buddhist leaders took a share. Therefore, the court ministers' proposal for "purifying the Tibetan Buddhists,"[364] without question, greatly upset the Tibetan Buddhist hierarchs who began to draw upon examples of previous Ming emperors' preferential treatment toward Tibetan Buddhists in order to keep their privileges.[365]

From the 1460s to 1480s, there had been a constant back and forth over the definition of "authentic Tibetan Buddhists" at the Ming court. On one hand, the court ministers were strong enough to press the throne to pass policies that "ethnic-Han were forbidden from practicing Tibetan Buddhism" or "Tibetan Buddhist monks were not allowed to travel freely anymore."[366] On the other hand, the Tibetan Buddhists had the private support of the Ming emperor and thus were still able to enjoy their privileges at the court. This, from the perspective of political history, could be

[363] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 789.
[364] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 672.
[365] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 672.
[366] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 672.

understood as a clash between the Ming's inner court, led by the emperor, and the outer court constituted of Confucian scholars.[367] Yet it is reasonable to believe that Tibetan Buddhist leaders were able to use their last opportunity to convert as many ethnic-Han followers as possible before the religion was completely politicized as an ethnic marker in the last years of the 15th century.

Starting from the 1460s onwards, the Ming carried out a series of actions to check the development of Tibetan Buddhism. The direct catalyst for these policies was the growing economic burden that tributary Tibetan Buddhists imposed on the Ming court, but what was behind that was the bigger picture of Tibetan Buddhism's fast spread in the highland from the 1440s. In retrospect, the late 15th century reforms indeed eased the heavy economic burdens on the Ming created by the highland inhabitants. But at the same time, it also ironically stimulated the further dissemination of Tibetan Buddhism on the ground.

By the end of the 15th century, Tibetan Buddhism had already spread widely in the highland. The degree of its dissemination is suggested in one of Qiu Jun's (邱濬) unprecedented proposals to completely abandon Songpan. As one of the most famous mid-Ming intellectuals, Qiu Jun, in his 1487 publication of *Daxue Yanyi bu* (大學衍義補), proposed to remove the entire Ming military from Songpan. Due to transportation difficulties and endless local rebellions, Qiu Jun had no faith in the military for effective control over the region. Therefore, he advocated to grant full control to the indigenous clergy, building them a giant monastery in which to dwell and govern and only stationing Ming troops hundreds of miles downstream of the Min River at Weizhou or Maozhou.[368] Although no evidence indicates that Qiu's idea was

[367] Zhao, *Mingdai Guojia Zongjiao Guanli Zhidu Yu Zhengce Yanjiu*,176-188.
[368] Qiu, *Daxue Yanyi Bu*, 1348.

supported by the court, his proposal unquestionably demonstrates how Ming elites had adopted the idea that Tibetan-rite Buddhism was the best method for civilizing Inner Asian savages.

In Qiu Jun's eyes, the indigenous clergy not only replaced court clergy, but even had the potential to completely substitute the Ming garrison system. One Minzhou case indicates that the robustness of Tibetan Buddhism even began to encroach upon the spiritual realm of the Han soldiers in the Ming's frontier military. In 1497, one Minzhou guard soldier named Zeng Wencai (曾文彩) transcribed a whole set of the *Prajnaparamita Sutra* in Tibetan. The colophon of the scripture illustrates the meaning of Tibetan Buddhism to a common Ming soldier. The colophon starts with the soldier's self-introduction. Originally from Xi'an, Zeng had recently moved to Minzhou. However, the soldier's recent life had not been smooth, as he was exhausted by a concurrent lawsuit and illness. Soldier Zeng felt helpless. The absence of the deities he used to worship back in Xi'an obviously made him quite insecure, as there was "no god from whom he could seek protection" (無神可保).[369] Therefore, Soldier Zeng turned to Tibetan Buddhism, which to him was the most powerful and efficacious religion in the local society of Minzhou. This story attests to the influence of Tibetan Buddhism in the local context. More importantly, it provides a hard-won private account that indicates a common Han soldier's very religious motivation for converting to Tibetan Buddhism. This story of Soldier Zeng resembles a similar scene that Michael Szonyi examines in the empire's outmost coastal frontier region "where soldiers found themselves relatively isolated, their old gods were less likely to survive

[369] "Boreboluomi Baqian Song Tiji."

as objects of communal worship."[370] In late 15th century Minzhou, Tibetan Buddhism seemed to have become an indispensable part of the highland soldiers' daily life.

How can we be sure that Zeng's experience is representative of those of other soldiers? To be frank, we cannot, at least not completely. But other materials convincingly show that Zeng Wencai was not alone. In Songpan, one stele preserved in the rural setting records an inscription of blessing that celebrates the restoration of a military fort, Gaotun Fortress (高屯堡). Gaotun Fortress was said to be the northern gate of Songpan.[371] But even in such a strategically important military base we see how just how active certain Tibetan Buddhist monks were. The blessing first provides the name, military ranks, and specific responsibilities of the supervisors and workers in the fortress' restoration project. It then lists several Tibetan Buddhist monks who were in charge of praying, most likely reciting mantra, when the construction was finished.[372] From their names, it seems that certain Tibetan Buddhist monks were still ethnic Han. The court ban seemed to have little effect in the highland society, and Tibetan Buddhism continued to transcend ethnic boundaries. Moreover, although it is impossible for us to know the exact attitude that Songpan military commanders held toward Tibetan Buddhism, we at least know that they did not think it a bad thing to invite some Tibetan Buddhist monks to give a blessing.

Tibetan Buddhism's penetration into the Ming's military system even became a feature of the landscape in the highland society. During my fieldwork in the summer of 2018, I found a group of precipice inscriptions several miles away from the location of the Xiaohe Battalion of Songpan (松潘小河守禦千戶所). On the cliff, huge Chinese and Tibetan inscriptions were carved side by side and painted a golden

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[370] Szonyi, *The Art of Being Governed: Everyday Politics in Late Imperial China*, 121.
[371] Cao, *Shuzhong guangji*, juan 31.
[372] "Xiufu Gaotunbao Zan."

color (Figure 3.1). While the Chinese inscriptions on the east side praise the longevity and prosperity of the Great Ming, the Tibetan inscription on the west side is the famous six-syllabled mantra, "Om Mani Padme Hum," which was the most frequently recited mantra for Tibetan Buddhists and means that through "the practice of a path which is an indivisible union of method and wisdom, you can transform your impure body, speech, and mind into the pure exalted body, speech, and mind of a Buddha."[373] Since the Chinese inscriptions were carved in the early 16th century, it is highly possible that the Tibetan mantra was carved around the same time. Today, the precipice inscriptions are frequently used as excellent materials for the local government to propagate the harmonious relationship between Han and Zang. As the government officials interpreted the inscription as such to me, however, I doubted whether the Ming dynasty court official would think in the same way.

Fig. 4.3: Chinese and Tibetan Precipice inscriptions in Xiaohe, Songpan

[373] H.H.Tenzin Gyatso, 14th Dalai Lama, "On the meaning of: OM MANI PADME HUM. https://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/tib/omph.htm

Regulating Tibetan Buddhists' activities and the religion's popularity in the Ming capital, the Ming court officials' restraints had little effect on the highland society. By the late 15th century, Tibetan Buddhism not only consolidated its control over the local non-Han communities, but likely also exerted great influence over the Ming's ethnic Han soldiers. Its strong influence even made certain court officials propose a complete withdrawal of Ming military from the region. Though its connection with the Ming court was greatly diminished, Tibetan Buddhism remained robust in the Ming's highland frontier.

Summary

Through the activities of a group of Tibetan Buddhist monks, this chapter examines the 15th century development of Tibetan Buddhism in the highland society. It demonstrates that Tibetan Buddhism was not intrinsic to the highland region, and its development was primarily prompted by Tibetan Buddhist monks who proactively spread Dharma seeds in the region. From the mid-15th century on, Tibetan Buddhist monks made full use of some Ming emperors' personal interests in Tibetan Buddhist practices, received various kinds of privileges from the court, and projected such preferential treatments back to the highland society. Relying on lineage networks, using institutional loopholes, or subterfuge, Tibetan Buddhists actively engaged themselves in the mid-15th century highland society and thus led to the fast dissemination of Tibetan Buddhism on the ground that reconfigured the local social structure. Such a trend did not slow down even when a series of Ming policies were put forward to check the development of Tibetan Buddhism in the highland society.

In this chapter, I also spoke to the "ethnicity paradigm" that has dominated the field of Chinese frontier studies to a considerable extent, especially when it comes to Ming China. Ming China has been long held as a proto-nationalist Chinese empire,

and this grand narrative still takes ethnicity as a decisive element that affected Ming China's interaction with frontier regions. But in the highland, ethnic labels barely affected how Tibetan Buddhism transformed the local society. Even if it was considered a somewhat exotic religion in the top-down narrative, it was not an ethnic marker at all locally. The religion transcended ethnic and language boundaries. Equating religious taxonomy with ethnic categories obscures the highly fluid and often ambiguous situation in the highland. In fact, as the next chapter will show, it was oftentimes status distinctions pertaining to taxation, household registration, and administrative jurisdiction that were useful for understanding social changes.

Chapter 5: Deserters

Borderlands were porous spaces where the movement of people was less restrained by modern state apparatuses before the implementation of border lines, the demarcation between nation-states, and the reification of territorial sovereignty.[374] The highland was just one such place. As diverse communities flocked to the highland with their languages, religions, commodities, and forms of knowledge in tow, the region gradually became a crowded and contested contact zone. While some groups enjoyed and took advantage of these movements, others wished to bring them under control.

In Chinese history, across time and space, people frequently moved into and out of borderlands. Historiographical interrogations for these borderland-crossings are as diverse as the movements themselves. Just to name a few, Naomi Standen, focusing on the fragmented north China in the 10th century, argues that political borders were not fixed geographical divisions but a function of relationships between leaders and followers.[375] Therefore, when local leaders changed allegiance, the borderline moved with them. Nicholas Tackett, situating Song China in an inter-state system, proposes that the travels of diplomats and their contacts with non-Han communities played a crucial role for the emergence of a new worldview and a sense of Chinese identity among educated elites.[376] Michael Szonyi takes a bottom-up perspective and argues that the contingently changing identities of Southeast coastal inhabitants—alternating

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[374] In Chinese history, Song China is an exception in this regard as it maintained clear, sharp, and bilaterally demarcated border line with its Inner Asian neighboring regimes. See Tackett, *The Origins of the Chinese Nation: Song China and the Forging of an East Asian World Order*, 105-137.
[375] Standen, *Unbounded Loyalty: Frontier Crossings in Liao China*.
[376] Tackett, *The Origins of the Chinese Nation: Song China and the Forging of an East Asian World Order*, 29-74.

between soldiers, merchants, smugglers and merchants—best illustrate how the Ming subjects practiced the strategy of regulatory arbitrage to take advantage of the imperial apparatus.[377] Siyen Fei, in her forthcoming monograph, suggests that cross-border captivity in the Ming-Mongol borderland, although coercive human trafficking, was also the vehicle of information circulation and knowledge transfer.[378] As there is no common pattern for borderland movements, scholarly examinations focus on different aspects and come to different conclusions.

This chapter, building on the aforementioned literature, examines the movement of people in the 16th century highland, particularly with the case study of northwest Sichuan. It focuses on why an increasing number of Ming soldiers deserted and fled into the deep mountain, how they perceived the highland region, what chain effects were catalyzed, and how different groups intervened in and and negotiated over such movements. By scrutinizing these deserters' experiences, this chapter argues that people were a type of resource in the highland, and it was such a resource over which various social groups competed. Investigating how people were categorized along different social taxonomies, this chapter also challenges the effectiveness of ethnicity as a useful analytical category in borderland studies.

Wax and Wane

Many scholars of Ming China would admit that the garrison system began to deviate from its original design from roughly the mid-15th century. Such changes, although emerging in multiple segments of the institution and demonstrating great regional distinctions, are loosely summarized in one classic work: "from a self-replicating garrison system that supported three million men to a mercenary system

[377] Szonyi, *The Art of Being Governed: Everyday Politics in Late Imperial China*.
[378] For a short introduction of Siyen Fei's forthcoming work, see https://live-sas-www-history.pantheon.sas.upenn.edu/people/faculty/siyen-fei

whose costs fell entirely to the people and the dynastic treasury; from garrison troops with quotas of men to mercenaries with no fixed numbers; from hereditary garrison troops to hired mercenaries: this was central to the rise and fall of the Ming period."[379] The author of these lines, Wu Han, in his 1937 publication that has been generally treated as the very first modern scholarly essay on the Ming military, attributes such shifts to official corruption and misuse of military personnel. Although Wu Han's "decline" narrative has been widely shared by later historiography,[380] some recent scholarship, in contrast, perceives these changes not as deterioration but as improvised responses to new challenges. David Robinson, for example, highlights the correlation between the emergence of hired soldiers and the growing use of silver as a medium of exchange, the monetization of labor and material obligations to the state, and the decline of the hereditary occupation household system.[381] While the causes for these transformations are multi-layered and interpretations vary depending on perspectives, the decades from mid- to late 15th century witnessed dramatic changes in the Ming's garrison system.

As Ming China's military outposts in northwest Sichuan, the garrison system there had been extensively worn out in the late 15th century. Multiple factors contributed to its decline. Some of them were nationwide and others regional. First, logistics maintenance was difficult due to the region's environment and topography. Because of the region's mountainous terrain and high altitude, local grain production was not sufficient to feed a large army.[382] Therefore, rations needed to be shipped in from

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[379] Wu, "Mingdai de Junbing," 94.
[380] Other than many Chinese scholars, certain scholarship in English takes on similar interpretation. See Swope, *A Dragon's Head and a Serpent's Tail*., 19-21.
[381] Robinson, "Military Labor in China, c.1500," in Zürcher, *Fighting for a Living: A Comparative History of Military Labour 1500-2000*, 79-80.
[382] In fact, when the Ming army initially took over Songpan, Emperor Hongwu even declared it a useless place lying hidden among 10,000 mountains and thus wanted to give it up. Although the emperor was later, after some back and forth, convinced by his frontline general of the region's strategic importance in guarding the empire's

regions several hundred miles away, most commonly counties scattered across the Chengdu plain, all the way into the deep mountains of western Sichuan.[383] But the sharply elevated terrain made such shipments extremely difficult. For example, the distance from Maozhou to Songpan, the region's military stronghold, is a mere 90 miles, yet the altitude rises over 1200 meters (Maozhou: 1580 m; Songpan: 2850 m). Based on my personal fieldwork experience, such a steep slope makes even modern vehicle transportation difficult, not to mention the terrible road conditions and harsh climate that the porters had to suffer centuries ago. In the 15th century, grain shipment was such exhausting work that even criminals were promised punishment expiation in exchange for hauling grain.[384] Supplying rations thus can be quite slow. Just as one official calculated, it required two porters to walk one entire month to deliver just one soldier's monthly ration.[385] Although the empire had tried multiple ways to maintain stable grain supply in the northwest Sichuan mountains, such as issuing salt license exchange programs,[386] establishing fort granaries,[387] and hiring local non-Han people as escorts,[388] none of these solutions really persisted. The difficult transportation conditions made the attrition rate high,[389] and the unscrupulous porters who dared to replace grain with sand only made the situation even worse.[390] Such difficulties rendered constant shortage in grain replenishment for the northwest Sichuan military.

Second, the court's general attitude, which leaned towards a conservative frontier policy, limited and even undermined the proper functioning of the northwest Sichuan

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western frontier, maintaining a large army there was always a heavy burden for the Ming. Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 50.

[383] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 50, 71. Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 328.

[384] *Ming xuanzong shilu*, juan 81, 6th year, month VII, gengwu.

[385] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 361, 480.

[386] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 328.

[387] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 743.

[388] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 902.

[389] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 878.

[390] Yi, *Choubian Yide*, 19.

garrison system: they were given general instruction for defense instead of offense. Unless out of absolute necessity, military actions would always be the last resort.[391] After all, less armed conflicts meant less troop deployments and less ration supplies, and thus less financial pressure for the Ming. One memorial points out precisely how the court's extreme policies pushed the frontier officials into a dead end. The relatively peaceful period during the Hongzhi reign (1487-1505) catalyzed an excessive anti-violence mentality among censorate officials. The result, frustrating enough, was that whenever a soldier killed a non-Han person, the censorate official would accuse the frontier commander of inciting rebellion; but if a soldier was reversely killed by a non-Han person, the accusation would be dereliction.[392]

The court's obstinate insistence on a defensive stance severely sapped the morale of the frontier military. One document shows that the resentment among the soldiers was so high that they even wanted to kill and eat the flesh of those non-Han villains, but they were forbidden to attack and thus felt extremely depressed.[393] Such unreasonable policies left the frontier commanders no choice but to assume a false peace by bribing the superiors and dumping responsibilities on underlings. Those who were successful in disguising frontier conflicts long enough to earn themselves a promotion were even praised by others for their wisdom and rich experience.[394] The nonfeasance in the local military rendered lax maintenance and low efficiency throughout the institution in that much military infrastructure, such as forts, garrison walls, and barracks was left crumbling,[395] and even weapons and armor for soldiers

[391] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 50, 68.
[392] Ming shizong shilu, juan 9, 16th year (zhengde), month XII, renchen.
[393] Guo, *Weimao Bianfang Jishi*, juan 12, "chouyi," "fulu," 66a.
[394] Ming *shizong shilu*, juan 9, 16th year (zhengde), month XII, renchen.
[395] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 886.

who could not afford to bring their own were not enough.[396] Not surprisingly, funds for these fields were most likely embezzled.

Third, the Ming court's institutional rearrangements further contributed to the local military's inefficiency. In the late 15th century, the local military bureaucracy suffered from two problems: a lack of superior military commanders and the decentralization of authority in the army. Before the 1460s, northwest Sichuan faced great pressure posed by the Dongbuhanhu regime and hence high ranking court officials such as censors-in-chief (都御史) and state department vice ministers (侍郎) were directly dispatched to supervise frontier military affairs.[397] Yet in 1470, the position of Sub-regional vice commander (分守副總兵), which was usually taken by top officials from central or regional governments, was eliminated because of the relatively peaceful situation on the ground, leaving the Left and Right Assistant Regional Commanders (協守左右參將) to take charge of separate regions individually.[398] Without a superior commander, the cooperation between these two officers, who had different military concerns and agendas, was problematic, especially during trans-regional military emergencies.[399] Although Surveillance Vice Commissioners in Charge of a Military Defense Circuit (兵備按察副使) were assigned later to take the supervising position, their relatively low rankings (3b-4b) rendered them incapable of overruling local military affairs, considering the fact that those Assistant Regional Commander positions were usually taken by Regional Military Vice Commissioners or assistant Commissioners (都指揮同知/都指揮僉事), who were high-ranking

[396] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 803.
[397] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 747.
[398] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 692.
[399] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 727.

commanders in the regional military system.[400] In the late 15th century, the removal of high-ranking officials from regional military office indicated the court's neglect of the northwest Sichuan frontier, and the interlocking bureaucratic system could only result in less efficient and effective operations.

In addition to these three difficulties that more or less derived from local factors, another two challenges were tied specifically to late 15th century social and political changes nationwide. The first one was related to changes in the military institution. From the mid-15th century, a rotating program was initiated to periodically transfer soldiers from nearby garrisons to northwest Sichuan military posts.[401] These soldiers, in contrast to the locally stationed "host troops" (主軍), were designated as "guest troops" or "rotating troops." (客軍/戍軍). This was most likely to ease the complaints of garrison soldiers who were supposed to station in the fortress perennially. However, these guest troops were outsiders whose transfer was only temporary. They were not familiar with local conditions, and hence less capable of effectively carrying out their duties.[402] One official commented that even the physical conditions of these guest troops were considered weak by northwest Sichuan standards. And when assigning military missions, those who were powerful, either physically stronger or better at building social connections, would manage to have themselves deployed to fortresses with less military pressure. In practice, this left strategic outposts, which also faced more military pressure and thus quite dangerous, to the ones who were not capable to do so. Many of these less fortunate soldiers came from poor families who would use their military rice rations and salary to pay their debts, rather than keeping

[400] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 747. For the concurrent posts of the Assistant Regional Commanders, just to give several examples. Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 683. Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 700.
[401] Guo, *Weimao Bianfang Jishi*, juan 9, "junbing," 23b.
[402] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 714.

themselves fed and warm.[403] Considering the quality of these soldiers, it is no wonder that a frontier official disappointedly commented that even one thousand Sichuan troops were no match for only one hundred or so non-Han rebels.[404]

The second new challenge came from the rising non-Han power in the highland. While the soldiers had to worry about the most basic needs for survival, the non-Han dwellers in the mountains, to use Donald Sutton's words, were experiencing "rising power and prosperity."[405] Such developments, I propose, resulted from the booming tributary interactions between highland communities and the Ming court. As Chapter 2 introduced, much wealth was syphoned off from the Chinese heartland through tributary channels in the 15th century and then poured into the highland society. In addition, the rich mineral resources in the mountains, such as silver, copper, iron, and lead not only attracted local miners but also stimulated long-distance trade which connected the highland and lower Yangtze region.[406] As the trading interactions increased, more and more merchants came to the highland and thus turned timbered passageways into busy trading routes.[407] A major consequence of the economic development of the highland was the changing power dynamics that was an inversion of the Ming's original plan. While in the late 14th century it was the Ming military that occupied farmlands in the northwest Sichuan river valley, much of these fertile lands were under the highland inhabitants' control in the late 15th century.[408] Some Ming soldiers, who oftentimes starved from the slow grain shipments and low quality rations, hired themselves out as tenants, but only found their earnings ripped off by

[403] Guo, *Weimao Bianfang Jishi*, juan 12, "chouyi," "fulu," 62a.
[404] Chen, *Huangming Jingshi Wenbian*, 2534.
[405] Kang and Sutton, *Contesting the Yellow Dragon: Ethnicity, Religion, and the State in the Sino-Tibetan Borderland*, 47.
[406] Guo, *Weimao Bianfang Jishi*, juan 8, "fengshou," 12a. *Huangming Tiaofa Shilei Zuan,* 716-717.
[407] Guo, *Weimao Bianfang Jishi*, juan 8, "fengshou," 5b.
[408] Yi, *Choubian Yide*, 21.

the cunning highland inhabitants.[409] In other scenarios, the rich highland inhabitants played the role of loan sharks and lent money to the Ming soldiers, often colluding with interpreters to make up fake contracts and claim ungrounded debts.[410]

One of the heaviest burdens that the highland inhabitants imposed on the miserable Ming soldiers was the so-called "Fan reward (番赏/赏番)." Technically, this Fan reward was a kind of honorarium to praise the loyalty and good behavior of the highland inhabitants. When the strong and powerful highland inhabitants frequently attacked and destroyed the Ming's military infrastructure, slaughtered Ming soldiers and raided supplies and livestock,[411] the so-called Fan Rewards in fact functioned as a type of protection fee that the Ming soldiers paid to buy peace.[412] The highland inhabitants came up with a lot of names, reasons, and methods to extort such Fan rewards, among which the most life-threating one to the Ming soldiers was toll collection during grain shipment. The highland inhabitants would implement roadblocks in certain transportation spots, usually narrow passages by steep cliffs, and whoever refused to pay for their passing-by would most likely be killed and their caravans plundered.[413] Therefore, many Ming soldiers would accept such extortion to buy peace. According to one report, one single battalion garrison from Diexi had to take on an annual payment in Fan rewards of 3,700 tael of silver.[414] The grain-shipment fee from inland Sichuan to Diexi, in contrast, was 0.78 to 1 tael per *shi*.[415] Since one common soldier's monthly rice ration was 0.8 *shi*, the grain shipped to Diexi with 3700 tael of silver could have fed between 4,600 to 6,000 soldiers.

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[409] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 843.
[410] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 886.
[411] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 752.
[412] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 878.
[413] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 811.
[414] Chen, *Huangming Jingshi Wenbian,* 1325.
[415] Cao, *Shuzhong guangji*, juan 31.

However, all this money was given to the non-Han dwellers, and it all came out of the common Ming soldiers' pockets.[416]

In the late 15th century, Ming soldiers lived miserably in the highland. They had to give away their allocated grain under coercion, almost as a form of tribute, to the highland inhabitants. And if they refused to do so, what followed would be the highland inhabitants' attack on the forts or raids on the shipment caravans. Yet the soldiers' demands to resolve such problems through military campaigns were rejected. This increasingly deteriorating relationship specifically in the late 15th century, I argue, stemmed from the wane of the tributary system. As introduced in the previous two chapters, the tributary system functioned as a major channel for the highland society to accumulate wealth and gain necessities from the Chinese heartland. Yet the entire practice was strictly restrained by the Ming court in the 1470s, particularly during the Chenghua reign, and thus resulted in a decreasing volume and frequency of highland tributary groups as well as tributary rewards. For the highland indigenes, this meant a diminished transfer of rich resources which put their livelihood at stake. They had to turn to alternative ways to acquire living necessities. The Ming military down in the river valley, which had become quite weak, was thus targeted. As one contemporary commented: "After having seen the rich farmland, the non-Han people would look down upon their barren land; after tasting the delicious grains, the non-Han people would complain their barley was not sweet enough. This is why our land and territory has been annexed day by day."[417] While the suspension of tributary diplomacy greatly eased the economic burden at court, it was the Ming soldiers stationed at the frontier who paid the price.

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[416] Guo, *Weimao Bianfang Jishi*, juan 12, "chouyi," 55b.
[417] Wang, *Wang Tingxiang Ji*, 460.

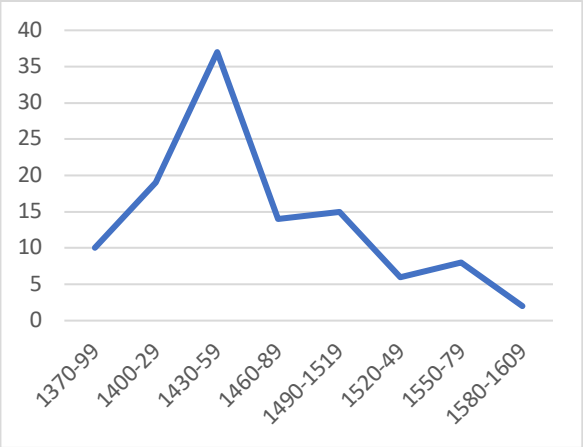

Table. 5.1: Numbers of Tributary groups from Northwest Sichuan[418]

This section has examined the transformation of the Ming military in the late 15th century in northwest Sichuan. The development of the garrison system was very much shaped by the local topography. Farmland was scarce in the deep mountains, making imported rice the major grain supply. But the mountainous terrain created much trouble: constant transportation of shipments of rations and other living necessities was slow, difficult and expensive. To reduce military operational costs, the Ming maintained a conservative frontier policy in northwest Sichuan that led to sapped morale and crumbling infrastructure in the military. In contrast to the worn-out garrison system, the highland communities were better off due to the wealth accumulated from their tributary interactions with the Ming. But the halt of the tributary system in the late 15th century transformed the rich highland inhabitants into aggressive neighbors who frequently bullied the Ming soldiers for money and food. This power dynamic created many changes in the social structure in the mountain. One of these changes was the massive migration of Han people into the mountains.

[418] Data for the chart comes from *Ming Shilu*. The following regions are taken as parts of northwest Sichuan: Longzhou 龍州, Maozhou 茂州, Wenchuan 汶川, Weizhou 威州, Songpan 松潘, Diezhou 疊州, Baoxian 保縣, Dasiman 達思蠻.

Heading into the Mountains

Border-crossing in the highland, as in other borderland spaces, was not a new phenomenon in the 16th century. However, this was not something that the Ming ruler would wish to see his frontier troops practice. Therefore, as soon as the Ming troops settled down in the highland in the late 14th century, they were ordered to stay within walled cities with their daily activities strictly regulated.[419] Many walled cities and fortresses in the highland, in this sense, became reifications of the Ming's imperial presence in the frontier.[420] Yet the Ming soldiers could not be restrained within the Ming enclaves forever, especially when their living conditions in the military stations were deteriorating. Therefore, in the late 15th century, many Ming soldiers in northwest Sichuan whose living conditions were dreadful chose to abandon their military duties completely when they had the chance.

The late 15th century decline of the Ming's military, as well the ensuing growing number of deserted soldiers, was part of a nationwide phenomenon. Kenneth Swope points out that "by 1500, Ming military strength may have been as low as 3 percent of prescribed levels in some garrisons, with desertion rates as high 85 percent in some areas despite numerous efforts by the government to ameliorate the problem."[421] Although the desertion rate in northwest Sichuan was not that high, it is still a reasonable estimation that at least several thousand Ming soldiers deserted and crossed the border. Why were the Ming soldiers able to desert successfully without being chased back by the military? Again, the topography of the region played an important role. As mentioned earlier, rations for the Ming army in northwest Sichuan

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[419] Zhu, *Ming Taizu Ji*, 175; Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 61.
[420] This may remind people of the Manchu cities during the Qing, the "sites of the re-formation of Manchu ethnicity" where "a new Manchu identity was forged", according to Elliott, *The Manchu Way: The Eight Banners and Ethnic Identity in Late Imperial China*, 90.
[421] Swope, *A Dragon's Head and a Serpent's Tail*, 19.

relied heavily on grain shipments. But the rugged terrain in the mountains posed great difficulties on logistics. Therefore, the Ming military was not able to build their forts too far away from the river valley where the grain shipment routes lay. Topography, in this way, affected the spatial pattern of Ming China's military infrastructure in its westmost frontier. The correlation between terrain and imperial power even offers one unique and inspiring way to conceptualize the distinction between the Chinese and non-Chinese realm. While in most frontiers, the advance of state power was conducted horizontally, the Ming's expansion was carried out vertically in northwest Sichuan. As the Ming army entered the region, they only occupied river valleys and left the mountains to the indigenes, as indicated in Fig. 5.1. In that regard, what we have from northwest Sichuan is an interesting picture in which Ming China is below a certain altitude while the non-Ming world sits amid the clouds and mist. Therefore, when the Ming soldiers decided to desert, they could just climb up along the mountainside or follow mountain valleys to go upstream. Because all the forts were concentrated in the river valley near the main transportation line, it was quite easy for them to elude Ming supervision.

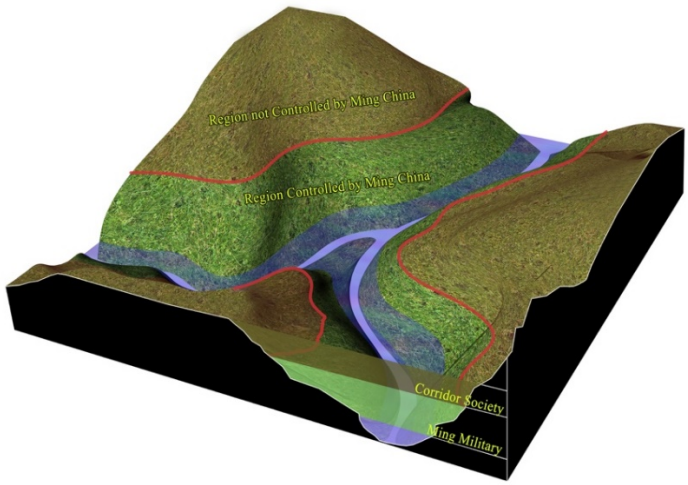

Fig. 5.1: Sphere of Influence of Ming China in the Highland[422]

In northwest Sichuan, Ming soldiers deserted either of their own volition or under others' compulsion, and both types of movements created much trouble for the Ming. Based on their incentives, I categorize the fled Ming soldiers as either proactive migrants or passive migrants respectively.

Proactive migrants deserted their military positions and resettled in the highland mostly of their own free will for survival. In northwest Sichuan at the time, many military men were in fact mere beggars who were hired as replacements to fulfill others' military obligations. But as soon as they arrived at the military posts, they found it impossible to keep themselves fed and warm to survive the harsh conditions in the mountain and simply deserted.[423] In fact, in addition to these hired beggar-soldiers who could not survive, military officials also suffered grain shortages and even starved to death.[424] When a certain military official died, his entire family collapsed with him: the wife was remarried to an underling of her deceased husband, the son became a thief, and the mother begged for food from others.[425] Such living conditions left many Ming military personnel no other option but to desert.

Many Ming soldiers took shelter in the deep mountains as they provided a possibility to keep away from imposed military duties and imperial tax and corvée burdens. Some soldiers would bring tea and cloth to the highland non-Han communities as a gift and then acquire permission to work in these communities as either tenants or craftsmen.[426] Many such hired hands with no ties back home would also marry local women and thus blend into the highland society.[427] Other fugitive

[422] I want to thank Wei Chen from EALC, University of Pennsylvania for his help in making this 3-D map.
[423] Cao, *Shuzhong guangji*, juan 31.
[424] Gujin tushu jicheng, "Songpan weimao lun," "Songpan shiyi."
[425] Gujin tushu jicheng, "Songpan weimao lun," "Songpan shiyi."
[426] Yi, *Choubian Yide*, 22.
[427] Yi, *Choubian Yide*, 22.

Ming subjects formed their own communities instead of joining the non-Han groups. One late 15th century memorial indicates that these deserted Han communities could have included more than 800 people and were quite diverse in terms of the identity of the community members. Merchants from lower Yangtze regions whose businesses failed, military grain shipment porters from Sichuan, and deserted soldiers from Yunnan all abandoned their previous lives and flocked to the highland.[428] It was in this context that the northwest Sichuan deep mountains appeared to be attractive to Ming subjects from near and far.

Compared with those who left for the highland out of their own will, many other Ming soldiers went into the mountains because they were captured and were kept in the non-Han societies as slaves. Slavery was part of the social repertoire of pre-modern northwest Sichuan. To the non-Han dwellers, men were useful human resources for heavy labor work such as farming, timber collection, and construction, while women could be used for domestic labor or taken as captured wives. In addition to slave labor, they were also used in political rituals. When the locals held public ceremonies pertaining to political alliance, slaves would be buried alive as sacrifice, indicating that whoever break the commitments would suffer the same fate.[429] Because of such demands for slaves, highland inhabitants frequently kidnapped and enslaved Han Chinese who were farming, woodcutting, or herding away from their communities or took military captives when they defeated the garrisons or plundered the caravans.[430]

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[428] *Huangming Tiaofa Shilei Zuan,* 716-717.
[429] Hu, *Hancun Yu Miaoxiang: Cong Ershi Shiji Qianqi Diandong Hancun Yu Chuannan Miaoxiang Kan Zhongguo*, 274.
[430] Guo, *Weimao Bianfang Jishi*, juan 12, "chouyi," 67a. Yuan, *Quanshu Bianyu Kao*, vol. 4, 107; Guo, *Weimao Bianfang Jishi*, juan 12, "chouyi," 44a.

Captivity became one major means through which the Ming lost its subjects to the highland society. Some materials indicate that for one specific fort within a period of two and a half years, while only 60 Han-Chinese were killed during a non-Han attack, 447 were captured.[431] Another memorial points out that more than 2,000 Ming subjects were captured within a short period.[432] Once captured, many captives were sold into the deep mountains so that the Ming troops were unable to retrieve them and the captives could not escape.[433] In the non-Han communities, the indigenes were called "A-ba," meaning "my lord" in Chinese; while the soldiers were called "nuerzha" which meant "servant."[434] Compared with those who proactively joined the highland communities, those who were captured unquestionably suffered a great deal.

Being captives in the mountains, the Han-Chinese were no longer Ming soldiers or civilians but slaves that can be sold or exchanged. Some highland communities must have captured too many Ming subjects because they even sold these captives in exchange for cattle.[435] This indicates that human trafficking was quite rampant in northwest Sichuan. In other scenarios, the captives were used to demand ransom. While regular soldiers could be redeemed for cheaper items such as lamb and wine,[436] military officials could be very expensive. One memorial indicates that when the highland inhabitants captured one guard commander, they asked for a ransom of 700 tael of silver to keep him alive.[437] This amount of money, if measured otherwise, equaled almost two years' protection fee that the Ming military used to buy peace from the highland inhabitants.[438]

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[431] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 725.
[432] Guo, *Weimao Bianfang Jishi*, juan 12, "chouyi," 44b.
[433] Yuan, *Quanshu Bianyu Kao*, vol. 4, 32.
[434] Guo, *Weimao Bianfang Jishi*, juan 12, "chouyi," 44b.
[435] Guo, *Weimao Bianfang Jishi*, juan 12, "chouyi," 44b.
[436] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 752.
[437] Guo, *Weimao Bianfang Jishi*, juan 11, "kanding," 34a.
[438] Guo, *Weimao Bianfang Jishi*, juan 11, "kanding," 33b.

It should be noted that the value of captive women was quite high by highland standards. In 1477, a company commander was captured by the highland inhabitants. But instead of ransom, the dwellers required one Maozhou female civilian in exchange for the captured commander. The female was once captured by the highland inhabitants but had successfully escaped. To retrieve their colleague, the Ming military officials agreed to such a demand. The Maozhou lady must have never imaged that it was her compatriots who were theoretically her protectors that in the end sent her back to the mountain that she had just made every effort to escape from.[439] Although we are not sure why the kidnappers desired her so much, in this case, it is clear that a common woman was valued more highly than a military commander from the highland inhabitants' perspective.

The phenomenal borderland-crossing activities in northwest Sichuan suggests the Ming's weak presence in the region, which derived not only from the region's difficult terrain, but more importantly the late 15th century power dynamics between the Ming military and highland society. Such phenomena greatly undermined the Ming's imperial authority and also sabotaged the solidarity of the Ming's frontier governance system. Given the situation, Ming officials began to calculate alternatives. After all, the western frontier, unlike the northern frontier shouldering the heavy responsibilities of defending against the Mongols, was less important to the Ming in a strategic sense. The non-Han society in the mountains was decentralized and the actual damage they could cause to the empire's general populace was limited. In contrast, it was the massive amount of money originally allocated for the frontier soldiers but eventually taken by the non-Han locals in various ways that caused a

[439] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 751.

greater burden for the Ming.[440] Both ministers at court and officials on the frontlines recognized this. Zhou Hongmou, a renowned court official, described the situation in the region as "greatly damaging" to Sichuan and proposed to withdraw half of the military to ease the pressure for grain shipments.[441] Tong Xuan, a frontier-stationed censor official, suggested a much more radical idea: the most troublesome area between Songpan and Maozhou be completely abandoned. Listing all the pros and cons, Tong described the region as the appendix, an organ that could be gotten rid of without causing damage: "for the vast heavenly empire, keeping this route would add no value, and giving it up would not be a loss either."[442] By doing this, the soldiers and grain porters could suffer less,[443] massive amount of grains could be saved to prepare Sichuan for natural disasters,[444] and the starving non-Han people might start fighting among themselves and thus weaken each other.[445] It seems that many Ming officials had already lost confidence in this troublesome frontier.

In the late 15th century and early 16th century northwest Sichuan, a large number of stationed soldiers left their military duties for various reasons, and many Ming officials also proposed to give up imperial control over the region, at least partially. The back and forth revolving around these issues illustrate the somewhat conflicted role of northwest Sichuan in the Ming's imperial blueprint: spending too much money on the region was a waste, yet completely abandoning it was also a shame. This situation changed in the early 16th century when the Mongols began to threaten the region.

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[440] Yi, *Choubian Yide*, 18.
[441] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 824.
[442] Yi, *Choubian Yide*, 18.
[443] Yi, *Choubian Yide*, 20.
[444] Yi, *Choubian Yide*, 20.
[445] Yi, *Choubian Yide*, 20.

In the Wake of the Mongols

What prompted the situation in northwest Sichuan to change was not court officials' sympathy for the poor frontier soldiers, but rather an exogenous cause: the growing threat of the Mongols. In the 1510s, the Mongols began to traverse the Ming's northwestern walled frontier, settled down near the Qinghai Lake, and threatened the highland region in eastern Qinghai and northwestern Sichuan from the west.[446] This greatly disturbed the local power dynamic. Although the highland inhabitants had bullied the Ming soldiers for decades, they were not as powerful as the Mongols. Therefore, many highland communities were annexed by the Mongols with their land occupied.[447] Although some members managed to flee, many others were subjugated by the Mongols.[448] Because these highland inhabitants were quite familiar with the local situation, they also took on jobs as military guides and led the Mongols to raid Ming villages and forts.[449] Such a geopolitical shift imposed great pressure on the Ming. In the 1510s, an increasing number of reports of Mongol attacks on the highland began to show up in Ming court documents,[450] and many officials worried about the forthcoming attacks by a military alliance between various individual Mongol and Muslim groups.[451] Compared to the heavily guarded northern frontier, the Ming's western frontier was never fully prepared for threats from the northern nomads. Thus, from the 1510s on, the Ming began to make an effort to solidify its vulnerable borderland military system in northwest Sichuan.

The frontier policy in the northwest Sichuan in the early 16th century went from a passive to a proactive stance. The transformation of Ming China's general attitude

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[446] Chen, *Huangming Jingshi Wenbian*, 1110.。
[447] Wang, *Beilu Shiji*, 135.
[448] *Mingshi*, 8544.
[449] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 934.
[450] Li, *Mingdai Xihai Menggu Shi Yanjiu*, 38.
[451] Wang, *Jinxi Beibing Fuzou*, 121, 150.

toward its western frontier is demonstrated in three initiatives: the first two aimed at refashioning bureaucratic structure, and the last one was mainly about military infrastructure renovation.

First, more high-level bureaucratic positions in the military were restored or newly established. For example, when the position of Sub-regional vice commander (分守副總兵) was canceled in 1470, it was still treated as a high-ranking position; but by its 1515 reestablishment, it had already became a low-ranking office as officials proposed to have top-level court officials such as censors-in-chief dispatched to northwest Sichuan.[452] Even Regional Commander (總兵), a position that had never been established in Sichuan, was set up as a direct response to the growing Mongol threat.[453] The (re)establishment of these two positions signaled that the empire had put more weight on the northwest Sichuan military. While a full-fledged military apparatus was in shape, new commanders were chosen, and new military positions were also created for specific areas with strategic importance.[454] The problem of corruption was considerably improved in that even embezzling a small amount of silver was a crime subject to punishment.[455]

Improving the overall quality of the frontier military was also a significant part of early 16th century military reform. To tackle the low quality of soldiers, most officials and commanders agreed to suspend the rotating guest troops, but the best replacement remained a topic for debate.[456] Official proposals fell into three categories. The first proposed to stick to the garrison system framework. Officials suggested to trace the military households that were supposed to take on military duties, conscript more

[452] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 954.
[453] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 928.
[454] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 964.
[455] Zhang, *Zhiyuan ji*, 134.
[456] Guo, *Weimao Bianfang Jishi*, juan 12, "chouyi," 57a.

housemen, and then send them to the frontier together with their wives and children.[457] Although this seemed to be a most convenient solution as it was carried out according to a framework that had been in use for over a century, such an idea was the least pragmatic when the garrison system was crumbling in the early 16th century nationwide.

In comparison, the second and third types of suggestions left of the garrison system framework and proposed to hire able-bodied men instead of enlisting them by force. The only difference between the second and the third approaches lies in where to find candidates to hire. The second type of proposal suggested looking for military candidates in locales where military households registered. To draw attention from potential hired hands, the frontier military would prepare everything for them, even wives, so that the soldiers would not miss home and the poor would be willing to enlist.[458] The third potential solution was to hire mercenaries locally in the frontier region. Proponents reasoned that those who grew up in the highland were accustomed to local conditions—including the food, climate, geography, and topography—thus making them qualified fighters. More importantly, they were willing to enlist because in northwest Sichuan rice rations and a salary from the military were "the only source to keep people alive that a household of five would need two in military to remain fed and warm while having one in military would still starve the rest of the family."[459] The third proposal was implemented in the end. Indeed, only those locally hired able-bodied men were feared by the non-Han people.[460] One could even speculate that many of these locally hired soldiers were actually former deserters who were willing to sign back up if given decent pay for a change. And the Ming documents' usage of

[457] Guo, *Weimao Bianfang Jishi*, juan 12, "chouyi," 56a.
[458] Guo, *Weimao Bianfang Jishi*, juan 12, "chouyi," 56a-56b.
[459] Cao, *Shuzhong guangji*, juan 31.
[460] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 714.

the term “local soldiers” (土兵) further highlights how the Han/Fan distinction was quite fuzzy and ethnic difference did not play a role in such scenarios.

The third prong of renovation in northwest Sichuan military was military infrastructure. To provide a safer environment for the frontier military, new routes impenetrable to arrows and rock attacks were carved out,[461] fences protecting the caravans from robbery were erected along the shipping route,[462] and garrison cities were enlarged.[463] In addition, more fortresses were constructed. Table. 5.2 demonstrates in detail how military forts in different subregions of northwest Sichuan were gradually built. It is clear that before the 16th century, most fortresses were constructed in areas to the south and west of Maozhou, leaving the area to the north and east less well-guarded. On one hand, this is because the regions to the north and east of Maozhou were deep in the mountains where the severe topography retarded the penetration of Ming forces; on the other hand, these areas were also closer to the steppe where Mongol powers were quite active. But starting from the 1520s in the early years of the Jiajing reign, more fortresses were built in these regions, indicating the Ming’s strengthened will to extend imperial power into the highland.

	Western Region 西路	Eastern Region 东路	Southern Region 南路	Lower Southern Region 下南路	Northern Region 北路
1435-44				1	
1445-54	1		1		
1455-64	1				
1465-74					
1475-84	6		7		2
1485-94	3				
1495-1504	8		3		1
1505-14	3		5	4	
1515-24	1	1	1	4	1
1525-34	2	3	9	4	11

[461] Guo, *Weimao Bianfang Jishi*, juan 8, “fengshou,” 20b-21a.
[462] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 936.
[463] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 1013.

1535-44	1	5	1		3
1545-54	1	2	1		
1555-64	4			1	

Table. 5. 2: Fortresses Constructed near Maozhou[464]

The construction of new military forts demonstrated the Ming's determination to strengthen its defenses on the western frontier where the Mongol threats grew. With more soldiers dispatched and fortresses constructed, the court gradually replaced a conservative frontier policy with an aggressive one. A military guidebook composed in the mid-16th century, *Veritable Records of Defense in Wei-Mao Area*, indicates that within the 21 military actions launched in northwest Sichuan during the Ming dynasty, 13 of them took place within the three decades from 1520 to 1550.[465] The scale of military campaigns also greatly escalated. While most previous military clashes in northwest Sichuan were rather small, as many as 30,000 Ming soldiers were deployed in certain campaigns in the early 16th century.[466] Thus, the military in northwest Sichuan was fashioned anew.

What followed the military refashioning project was an attempt by the Ming to penetrate the frontier society ideologically. In the northwest Sichuan non-Han society, people used a pair of colors, "black" (黑) and "white" (白), as references to moral standards. Such a taxonomy was in use in northwest Sichuan least since the northern Song era,[467] and they were most likely reflections of indigenous knowledge of social categories. To the indigenous people, "black" and "white" represented the two poles of morality. While being called "white" implied kindness, compliance, and civility, those who were troublesome, aggressive, and evil were often deemed "black" in the

[464] Data come from *Weimao Bianfang Jishi*.
[465] Guo, *Weimao Bianfang Jishi*, juan 11, "kanding," 30b-40a.
[466] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 1026.
[467] Wen, "Black and White People in the Legends of Kuang Yu Tu."

local context.[468] Even today, there are still local customs in northwest Sichuan, such as worshipping white stones, that derive directly from the cultural implication of "white".[469] Put simply, "white" and "black" indicated how the locals distinguished good from bad, and these two type of behavior undoubtedly could change in certain circumstances, seeing as adjectives of "good" and "bad" are relative concepts.

When the Ming began to penetrate deeper into the local society starting in the 1520s, the imperial forces adopted these terms but twisted their connotations from indicators of good and evil to signs of loyalty and disloyalty to the Ming sovereign. One map collected in the *Enlarged Terrestrial Atlas* (廣輿圖) is of particular importance for examining how the Ming played with this naming practice and intended to impose it onto the indigenous society. The map was named the *Frontier Map of Songpan* (Fig. 5.2 松潘邊圖), and it was compiled between 1538 and 1545.[470] Although highlighting Songpan in its designation, the map actually covered the entire area of northwest Sichuan. The most eye-catching feature of the map is the labeling of "white people" and "black people" written next to each hamlet. On the map, there were in total 112 so-called "black people" label (黑人), and 72 "white people" labels (白人).

[468] Cao, *Shuzhong guangji*, juan 32.
[469] Gele, *Zangzu de Zaoqi Lishi Yu Wenhua*, 247.
[470] Chen Zongxiang argues that the map was made after 1538. I further argue that because the new forts established by He Qing in 1545 were not indicated in the map, the map should not be made after 1545. See Chen Zongxiang, "Mingji songpan biantu chutan: shilun tuzhong heiren bairen wei liangda buluo qunti," in Zhao and Yu, *Minzuxue, Renleixue: Zhuishu Yu Fansi*, 271.

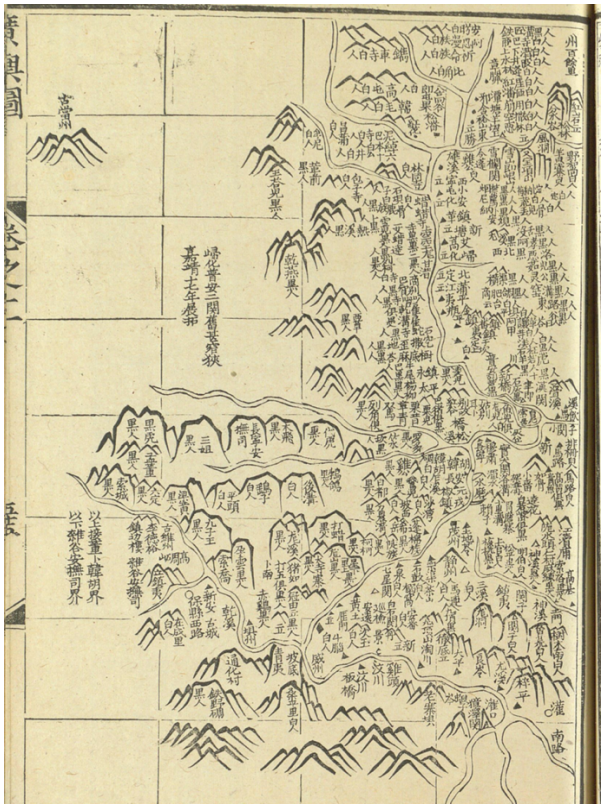


Fig. 5.2: *Frontier Map of Songpan*

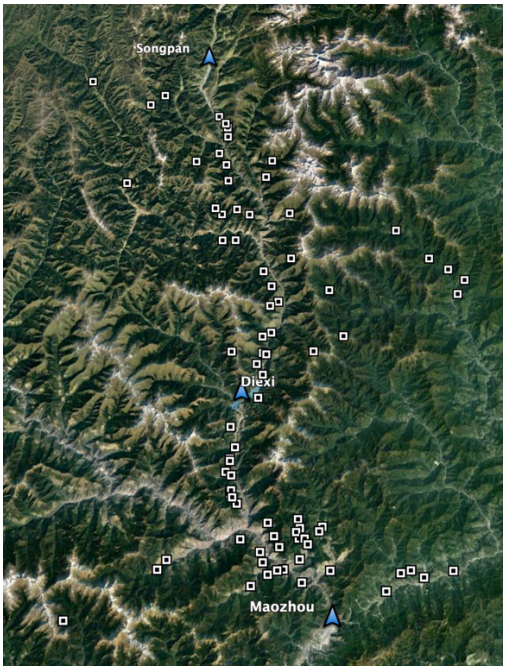
Frontier Map of Songpan was the only map in the atlas that includes such a feature. Obviously, it should be viewed as a visualization of the local Black-White taxonomy. But the map actually provides more. The map was made between Jiajing 17 and 24, a relatively peaceful period when a large-scale siege of Maozhou in Jiajing 15 was defeated and all the rebels destroyed.[471] Therefore, the military leader had this map made as a report on collected intelligence so as to prepare for possible future attacks from the indigenes. Mid-Ming frontier military commanders preferred to have intelligence maps drawn in order to make certain the potential alliances and potential threats they were dealing with,[472] and the *Frontier Map of Songpan* undoubtedly served the same purpose. It was through this process that the meanings of "Black" and "White" experienced subtle yet significant changes.

[471] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 1012.
[472] Wan, *Huangming Jingji Wenlu*, 350.

On the platform Google Earth, I pinned the so-called "black" and "white" groups separately for the sake of better visualization and analysis (Fig. 5. 4 & Fig. 5. 5).[473] The resulting maps clearly show that most hamlets of "White" people were in proximity to the three most important military strongholds in the Ming's northwest Sichuan frontier: the Songpan and Maozhou garrisons and the Diexi battalion. Yet most "Black" ones were located relatively far away from the Ming's military apparatus.

In the local cosmology, "Black" and "White" were labels of bad and good behaviors. However, it is unlikely that all evildoers lived in the deep mountains, while all good people intentionally dwelled near the Ming military bases. A more reasonable interpretation is that this map only indicates the *good* and *bad* from the Ming's perspective. While those living close to the Ming military were relatively well-behaved, most likely as a result of the military's intimidation, the Ming treated them as "good" people and thus borrowed indigenous labels and designated them as "white" communities. In contrast, those who lived in the deep mountains between Maozhou and Songpan were treated as evil because Ming grain caravans were frequently plundered there. That, of course, would render them "bad" communities from the Ming's perspective, and thus "black." In this regard, the Ming borrowed terms from the local value system, but applied them according to the Ming's own standard.

[473] Because many hamlets in Map 5.3 are difficult to track down nowadays, Map 5.4 & 5.5 do not include all the communities on Map 5.3.



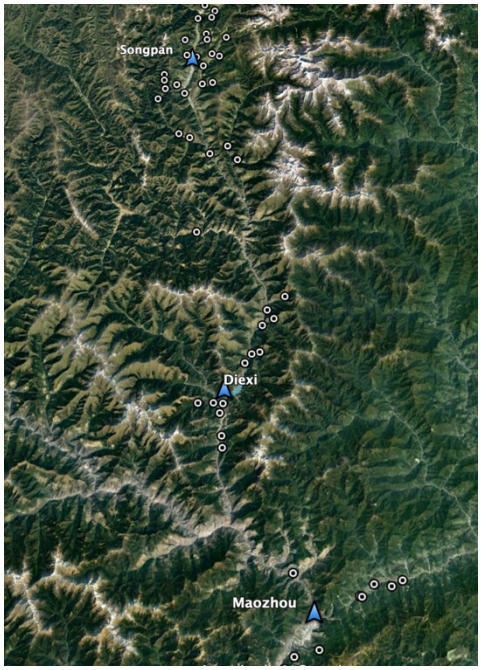


Fig. 5.3: Hamlets with "Black" people Fig. 5.4: Hamlets with "White" People

In addition to using old local vocabularies, the Ming twisted them to match the imperial will. This was a clear sign of attempts of imperial penetration. Having constructed more fortresses and dispatched more soldiers in the mountains, the Ming was able to intimidate the mountain inhabitants with military power to a certain extent. The Ming further endeavored to exert ideological influence in the local society. Trying to adopt indigenous taxonomies while substituting their connotations with definitions that accorded with the Ming's expectation was one typical move. Moreover, what happened on the Ming's western frontier was not a unique phenomenon: in other frontier regions, we also see the Ming's adoption of indigenous taxonomies in tandem with imperial expansion. In his monograph on the Ming's southern frontier, Leo Shin examines a similar process that occurred during the Ming's conquest of Guangxi. As more interactions took place and the Chinese officials developed better knowledge of the indigenous people, taxonomies used for

Guangxi locals became increasingly bifurcated and detailed maps drawn out.[474] By doing this, the Ming wished to amend social structures in a smooth way. Yet questions still remain: To what extent did this practice affect the indigenes? Could the Ming's ideological imposition successfully reshape the local people's perception of social structure?

The short answer to these questions is no. Despite that northwest Sichuan was largely Sinicized in later periods, in the mid-16th century, the empire had not yet penetrated that deeply. For quite a while, local ideas co-existed with imperial discourse. One official memorial speaks to the juxtaposition of the different understandings of "Black" and "White" from the Ming's and the locals' perspectives. In March 1545, several indigenous hamlet leaders relatively friendly to the Ming forces sent messages to the military to inform them of a forthcoming attack. The strike would be mounted by Qingpian hamlet inhabitants, who claimed that the Ming soldiers killed some "White" people in their community, and therefore they were about to take revenge.[475] In the *Frontier Map of Songpan,* Qingpian hamlet was labeled as the home of "Black people" because it frequently attacked Ming forts and raided grain stocks. But the Qingpian hamlet villagers were less likely to know how the Ming identified them; instead, what they understood was that some "White" people in their community, probably community members who were honest and kind in their daily lives, were killed by the Ming soldiers. Therefore, in the eyes of these Qingpian people, it was those Han-Chinese armed murderers that were truly "Black." In this case, both the Ming and Qingpian inhabitants considered themselves to be "white" and the other side "black." Obviously, there was a gap between how the Ming

[474] Shin, *The Making of the Chinese State*, 142-144.
[475] Zhang, *Zhiyuan ji*, 388.

understood these terms and how the locals perceived them. By the mid-1540s, despite Ming attempts, the empire's survey and categorization has little success in changing in how the indigenes understood social relationships.

From the 1520s to the 1540s, the Ming drastically refashioned its northwest Sichuan military by granting it more political weight, hiring more able-bodied men, and constructing more military infrastructure in the face of Mongol threats. Yet these changes were mainly made within the Ming's military apparatus, and as the case of "black" and "white" shows, the Ming's reconceptualization of the region did not have much effect on the ground. However, because of the intensive military actions starting from the 1550s, we shall see more changes in the northwest Sichuan society, especially in the ethnic constitution of its population.

Blurred Boundaries

Many historians of Ming China would agree that the reign of Emperor Jiajing (1522-1566) was characterized by extensive frontier crises. In addition to the oftentimes singled out 'Southern Dwarfs and Northern Caitiffs' (南倭北虜), the Ming empire in the early 16th century was in fact haunted by social unrest on nearly all sides. One common feature of these frontier turbulences is the intensified border-crossing activities. Yet the local ramifications varied between different frontiers. For example, on the empire's northern frontier, the White Lotus practitioners deserted into the steppe and helped the Mongol Khans to construct lordship on a religious basis,[476] while on the empire's coastal frontier, the Han sailors colluded with the alleged Japanese pirates and engaged extensively in raiding their own compatriots.[477] On the empire's western frontier, as this section examines, the cross-border migrants created

[476] Lü, "Shilun Andahan Dui Yishi Xingtai de Xuanze."
[477] Szonyi, *The Art of Being Governed: Everyday Politics in Late Imperial China*, 83-109.

an hybrid society which challenged the empire's ethnic imagination of the region and amended its ways of regulating imperial subjects.

Unlike in the empire's northern and coastal frontiers where many border-crossers were civilians, deserted soldiers constituted the majority of those who traversed the Ming's western frontier. This was most likely because the Ming's western frontier was under full administration of the military, while the northern and southeastern frontier regions were co-governed by civilian and military systems and therefore had more civilian inhabitants. Despite the series of reforms in the early 16th century, desertion on the Ming's western frontier was still a serious problem. And quite ironically, the situation became even worse as the reforms deepened. I will examine this process in detail through the case of He Qing.

He Qing (?-1555 何卿) was an experienced frontier general. He was known for being a 'hawk' advocating strict frontier policy, holding a racist position toward the local inhabitants, and successfully guarding the Ming's western frontier region for decades.[478] One memorial even praised him as the most essential element for keeping Sichuan safe because he alone was worth ten thousand armed soldiers.[479] In the early years of the Jiajing reign, He Qing was promoted to the position of vice-commander of Songpan. Upon arrival, he was shocked by the decrepit fort structures and demoralized troops, and thus he decided to bring back its military edge through reform. Regulating military deployments, grain shipments, and personnel appointments, He Qing also paid attention to military infrastructure maintenance. He not only reconstructed many fortresses and built more than 20,000 barracks,[480] but also erected border walls hundreds of miles long to protect the grain shipment

[478] Ceng, *Qiangzu Shike Wenxian Jicheng*, 1214.
[479] Zhang, *Zhiyuan ji*, 388.
[480] Yang, *Daoguang Maozhou Zhi*, juan 3, "zhengji," 23a.

routes.[481] However, when He Qing was determined to fully refresh the northwest Sichuan military, the local situation ruthlessly struck him: as many soldiers were dispatched to reinforce old and construct new fortifications, a large proportion simply took this as a great opportunity to desert into the mountains.[482]

The mid-16th century desertions were quite different from those in the late 15th century in context, process, and consequence. First, the continued movements of the military population into the highland does not necessarily mean that the early 16th century reforms were unsuccessful. The reforms did refashion the military apparatus and adjust the power balance as the captivity and slavery of Ming soldiers by highland inhabitants almost completely disappears from Ming texts thereafter. In that case, why did the 1550s Ming soldiers still desert?

Zhao Shiyu proposes that the desertion in the mid-16th century should be understood in the context of a nationwide migration toward the frontiers. He argues that a booming population in the Chinese heartland prompted numerous Ming subjects to flood into the empire's margins where living pressure was lighter but had more farmland, natural resources, and business opportunities.[483] Therefore, quite different from those in the late 15th century who were captured and taken into the mountain, border crossings in mid-16th century northwest Sichuan were spontaneously conducted by many Ming subjects in pursuit of easier lives. And they indeed had better living conditions. As I have demonstrated in previous sections, many Han people in the mountain lived miserably as unfree labors or even slaves in the late 15th century; but in the mid-16th century, their living conditions improved. Many of them, as shown in the *Frontier Map of Songpan* (松潘邊圖), converged in communities

[481] Mao, *Mansi Hezhi Jiaozhu*, 66-67.
[482] Qu, *Wanli Wugong Lu*,309-310.
[483] Zhao, "Mingchao Longwan Shiqi de Zuqun Guanxi Yu Diguo Jinglue," 126-130.

exclusive to Han people and thus were not subject to non-Han rulers (Fig. 5.5). Others, although still taken in by the highland inhabitants, played much more important roles in those communities, as they could provide military information to help the non-Han groups compete with the Ming.[484]

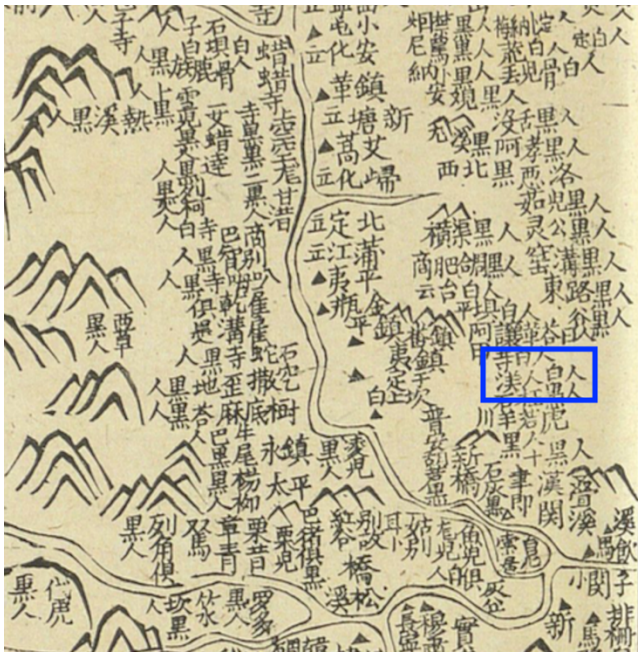


Fig. 5.5: Hamlet of Han people (漢人寨) in *Frontier Map of Songpan*

Fully aware of the value of these defeated Ming subjects as both fighters and laborers, He Qing realized the best and only way to stop the soldiers from deserting was to eliminate the communities to which his soldiers were heading. Hence, when the maintenance work was done, He Qing began to use violent means to stop desertion. Starting from the 1550s, he launched several large-scale military campaigns and achieved remarkable success. The bloodiest campaigns were fought with the *Baicao* community. In a series of battles against *Baicao*, He Qing's troops in total destroyed 47 hamlets, burned down 4,800 Diao Houses (碉房), a northwest Sichuan style of stone building that combined defensive and accumulation function, and took

[484] Yi, *Choubian Yide*, 22.

tens of thousands of livestock, grain stores, and weapons as war rewards.[485] Countless indigenes were killed or became homeless. It was also during this process that He Qing started to "filter" the highland communities by teasing the deserted Ming soldiers out.

Baicao (白草), as one primary target of He Qing's campaigns, was long believed to be an ethnic *Qiang* community in the Ming court's narrative. Together with *Baima* and *Mugua*, the three communities constituted the so-called 'three *Qiang* of Longzhou,' and *Baicao* was considered the most villainous one.[486] For a long time, *Baicao* had created significant trouble for the Ming military. It frequently attacked Ming forts, plundered grain caravans, and captured and enslaved Ming soldiers until He Qing's ruthless suppression. But according to those who participated in the battle or were in charge of post-war reconstruction, *Baicao* was not a *Qiang* community at all. Zhang Shiche, the civil official who commanded the battle together with He Qing, pointed out that *Baicao* was in fact a community newly established by Fan migrants who moved around in the highland.[487] Yuan Zirang, a local official who was in charge of post-war reconstruction, also wrote in his first-hand notes that "those who we used to identify as *Qiang* in Longzhou such as *Baima* and *Baicao* are now all deemed Fan; with the Fan expanding in all directions, the *Qiang* will be forgotten!"[488] Yet contrary to Yuan's anxiety-ridden words, Qu Jiusi, another civil official working in the northwest Sichuan frontier, noted completely different observations. Qu claimed: "The three Longzhou *Qiang* communities each have around five hundred inhabitants.

[485] *Ming shi*, liezhuan, 5589.
[486] *Ming shi*, Sichuan tusi zhuan.
[487] Zhang, *Zhiyuan ji*, 375.
[488] Yuan, *Quanshu Bianyu Kao*, 277.

But most of them are actually ethnic Han. Taking shelter in the mountain, these Han people have offered the indigenes much help!" [489]

Instead of understanding these records as mutually exclusive narratives, I argue that they together point to the hybrid nature of the *Baicao* community. Because of the frequent flow of people in the region, the ethnic constitution of *Baicao* had already became quite mixed. In other words, even if *Baicao* was a *Qiang* community at the time of its first contact with the Ming, in the mid-16th century, Han people and Tibetans had already become significant parts of the population's makeup. Yet in the Ming court's records, the community was still documented as a *Qiang* group, thus prompting Yuan Zirang's and Qu Jiusi's surprise. Here we see a gap between macro-history narrative and local reality. On one hand, many Ming officials tended to categorize highland communities with static ethnic labels and even debated whether a community was essentially Qiang or Fan; on the other hand, such understandings failed to capture the fluidity of the region: flexibility, contingency, and even uncertainty. Thus, ethnic taxonomy, as an analytical framework, was of little help for both Ming officials and modern historians. As a diverse array of populations frequently moved around the highland, ethnic boundaries were easily transgressed and transcended.

Ethnic terms were not very useful to characterize the hybrid highland communities such as *Baicao*, and the terms were not applicable to categorize Ming subjects in the highland either. He Qing's post-war policy best attests to this point. During the military contact, He Qing and other Ming officials noticed that many captured Ming subjects were enslaved in the *Baicao* community. Therefore, by taming the rebellious *Baicao*, He Qing must have thought that it was time for these Ming subjects to return.

[489] Qu, *Wanli Wugong Lu*, 309-310.

But to his surprise, many of these former Ming subjects simply refused to leave the mountain. One memorial attributed such a seemingly incomprehensible situation to a concern for the safety of the Ming captives. These Ming subjects, who were stuck in the mountains under coercion, had stayed with the *Baicao* community for so long that even their appearance and daily mannerisms had changed to the non-Han style. Therefore, they were quite worried that the Ming troops would take advantage of their unrecognizable appearance and kill them as barbarians for rewards. Many of them thus chose to stay alive in the mountains rather than take the chance of being misrecognized.[490] Once informed of this situation, He Qing immediately took action. He ordered white flags to be erected at every traffic intersections with "amnesty for the "Han" people (招撫漢人)" written large in Chinese script. In addition, he requested Ming officials to stand by these flags as supervisors to make detailed registers and testimonials for the returners.[491] The information that He Qing wanted to deliver was quite clear: the safety of those who were willing to return would be guaranteed. By doing this, He Qing believed that those who wanted to reclaim their Ming identity would not just die in the woods or go back to the rebellious groups.[492]

What He Qing did was quite considerate, and I believe it is highly possible that, although historical materials did not specify, many deserted Ming subjects were convinced and returned to their previous lives. However, I argue that the Ming official's memorial only tells half of the story. It serves a specific political purpose to create a benevolent and compassionate image of He Qing but disguises some other information regarding fugitive Ming subjects in the mountains. In fact, other than those being captured, many former Ming subjects in the highland were proactive

[490] Zhang, *Zhiyuan ji*, 367.
[491] Zhang, *Zhiyuan ji*, 375.
[492] Zhang, *Zhiyuan ji*, 44.

deserters, just like those who deserted under He Qing's nose when they were dispatched for construction or sentry duty. In other words, these soldiers deserted of their own volition. And they must have made this decision after clear consideration, and thus would not easily answer He Qing's call to resume their identity in the Ming military. For those who refused to continue to be Ming subjects, it was easy to hide in the mountains because, as the previous memorial showcases, it was not difficult for people to change their appearance and lifestyle or pick up new languages. In that regard, one may wonder: What exactly does ethnic label, such as Han, mean on the ground? And how did people decide one's ethnicity when classic ethnic indicators such as language, custom and appearance all lose efficacy?

He Qing's methods for retrieving "Han" people from the mountain address these questions to some degree.[493] As was written on his flags, those who answered his call and resumed their imperial duties would be embraced as "Han." As the reasoning goes, those who chose not to return, although they were ethnically not different from those who did return, were thus deemed "non-Han." In this regard, I argue that one important message He Qing's policy reveals is the transformation of "Han" from an ethnic label to a jurisdictional status marker. What separated "Han" from "non-Han" did not lie in ethnic features, but whether the referent would serve the Ming in its imperial apparatus. "Han" was used by He Qing as a pronoun for "Ming subject." It thus became a frame of reference to determine one's political identity, according to which being "Han" and being a Ming subject were one and the same. In this vein, "Han" and "non-Han" were no longer ethnic concepts but were politicized into jurisdictional statuses.

[493] Here Han in quotation mark is a proper noun in specific context.It refers to what He Qing meant in 招撫漢人. While in other paragraphs Han in italic is used in its most normal sense as an ethnic identity.

The mid-16th century battles undoubtedly failed to draw all Han people out of the highland mountains. Many of them stayed behind and kept playing important roles in affecting power dynamics in the late 16th century highland. Some lived in non-Han communities and taught tactics to their fellows in the community to deal with incoming Ming invasions.[494] Others stayed behind for religious reasons. Among the Tibetan Buddhists living in *Baima*, another so-called *Qiang* community, many of them were highly possible ethnic Han judging by their names. To be more specific, within the 12 out of 18 hamlets in the *Baima* community where Tibetan Buddhists dwelled, at least 4 had ethnic-Han Tibetan Buddhists. Chapter 3 has already pointed out that after the Chenghua reign, ethnic-Han people were not allowed to practice Tibetan Buddhism anymore. Therefore, many of them who were already Tibetan Buddhists by then and chose religious belief over political affiliation moved into the highland mountains where Ming laws were less effective. While these former Ming subjects kept their Chinese surname, allowing modern historians to speculate about their ethnic backgrounds, many other deserted soldiers successfully assimilated themselves into the highland society. They changed their surnames, formed new kinship relations in the mountain, and eventually de-sinicized themselves.[495] As time went by, the Han features in these deserters would only become more and more tenuous.

In his monograph examining cultural contact between Ming officials and non-Han groups in Guangxi, Leo Shin argues that the encounter with the somewhat barbaric mountain dwellers catalyzed the formation of a sense of Chineseness among many Ming elites and thus shaped the ideological contours of an ethnocultural China.[496]

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[494] Qu, *Wanli Wugong Lu*, 305.
[495] Qu, *Wanli Wugong Lu*, 305.
[496] Shin, *The Making of the Chinese State*.

While Shin mainly pays attention to elite narratives, I have drawn on local highland examples to portray a seemingly opposite historical process: as the Ming forces interacted with the highland society, many ethnocultural concepts were gradually deconstructed by the fluidity embedded in frontier migration. But this does not necessarily mean that my argument contradicts that of Leo Shin. Rather, such a contrast brings out the nuance embedded in the center-periphery paradigm and reminds readers of the importance of examining the two sides of the story together.

Here, I have proposed that, in the highland society, ethnic identity, which can be quite flexible and thus transformative, was not so important in the local power dynamics; what was really at stake was one's political allegiance, which determined his or her social position. In this regard, the highland provides a space where ethnicity, as the dominant analytical framework, may be revisited and the multidimensionality of many seemingly well-established terms and concepts is revealed.

Summary

This chapter focused on population movements in the highland. It demonstrates how such movements were initiated, regulated, and negotiated by different parties as their intentions and understanding were oftentimes at odds. In the late 15th century, the highland was a place where indigenes overpowered Ming soldiers. Highland inhabitants, whose stable supply of various resources through the tributary system was terminated, became quite aggressive; Ming soldiers, who had enjoyed decades-long peace and were unable to respond to such aggressions, could only maintain a defensive position and behaved rather feebly. Many Ming soldiers were thus bullied, killed, and captured by the highland inhabitants, making the region a hell to common soldiers and a nuisance to Ming court officials. In the early 16th century, as the

Mongols moved southwest to the other side of the highland, the Ming was forced to reposition the highland in its strategic map. Large-scope military reforms were thus carried out with the intention to bring back military morale to prepare for possible attacks by the Mongols. Yet the limits of Ming China's capacity for mounting imperial expansion were also exposed through these reforms. As new fortresses were built and more soldiers dispatched in the highland, military desertion prevailed. But in the process of regulating such unwanted movements, the Ming empire found its taxonomy based on ethnic categorizations outdated and useless. Therefore, many seemingly ethnocultural labels began to adopt new connotations, morphing into jurisdictional concepts and political markers. Tracing the behavior of Ming military deserters, this chapter has illustrated how the flow of population played its role in affecting the course of highland history.

Chapter 6: Lands

In the modern era, territory is a twinned concept with sovereignty, and together the two elements function as significant pillars to erect nation-states featuring clearly marked border lines. For empires, in contrast, territories at the frontier act as touchstones to reveal the extent and facility of imperial expansion. As Charles Maier points out, "Empires… emerged from the interactions of frontier with the historical center," thus they were "created from the outside in."[497] This chapter examines the role and function of the highland as a buffer zone territory in the geopolitical interaction between East and Inner Asian regimes during the pre-modern era. It examines how perceptions of the highland were affected by the negotiation and contestation between Chinese, Mongol, and Tibetan regimes over the region's territoriality. Examining land utilization, natural resource extraction, and the attendant jurisdictional disputes, this chapter argues that the late 16th century competition over the highland played a key role in the region's transformation from a borderland into a border.

In the 16th century, the relationship between Ming China and its neighboring regimes was more than what is described in the simplified binary framework of "domination" and "resistance." Rather, the mutuality between the so-called center and periphery, as Kathlene Baldanze points out in her examination of the Ming-Vietnam encounter, was defined by constant negotiation.[498] This chapter further suggests that the negotiation over territory-crossing played a major role in such interactions. As we

[497] Maier, *Once within Borders: Territories of Power, Wealth, and Belonging since 1500*, 22.
[498] Baldanza, *Ming China and Vietnam: Negotiating Borders in Early Modern Asia*.

can see from the scholarship reviewed below, it is oftentimes the back and forth between attempts of regulating frontier territory-crossing and efforts that aimed at challenging such attempts that characterized these interactions, leading to the transformation of frontier territory from borderland to border. Eric Talizcozzo's *Secret Trades, Porous Borders* illustrates how the ability to regulate the unsanctioned movement of goods over thousands of miles of coastline became the venue to test the limit of imperial expansion and the scope of the imperial control of the Dutch and British in their southeast Asian colonies.[499] Seonmin Kim's research on Qing-Chosen interactions at their buffer zone speaks directly to the correlation between border crossing and the nature of frontier territory. As the Qing sought to maintain a monopoly over the production of ginseng in its Manchuria frontier, it put strict regulations on the movement of people and wished to militarize a loosely charted borderland into a clearly demarcated boundary. In these two cases, the attempts to weaken, if not challenge, control over border crossing were all countered from the bottom up by forces that intended to prevent the transformation of frontier territory from borderland to boundary. While the European colonists' idea of monitoring and curtailing smuggling was confronted by coastal inhabitants for the sake of their daily livelihood, the Manchus were persuaded by the Chosŏn Koreans through the rhetoric of the tributary system and eventually dropped the idea of demarcating a middle ground. In both cases, how to perceive, control, or take advantage of territorial crossings was closely tied to how the frontier territory were defined.

From roughly the 1540s to the 1590s, the highland witnessed a higher frequency of the drastic movement of goods, religious beliefs, and people than before. This was

[499] Tagliacozzo, *Secret Trades, Porous Borders: Smuggling and States Along a Southeast Asian Frontier, 1865-1915*.

mainly caused by the Mongol civil war, the forming of a Mongol-Tibetan religious community, and the Ming's military response to these changes at the time. With various communities flocking to and mingled in the highland, the region soon became a place where new ideas and norms overwrote old principles. By the end of the 16th century, the highland had transformed from an uncharted territory into a crowded nexus in the "great game" between China, Mongol, and Tibet. This chapter consequently looks at how the series of geopolitical interactions over transregional movement affected the territoriality of the region.

Highland as a Shelter Without Enough Oxygen

The direct catalyst for a large number of Mongols entering the highland in the early 16th century was the Mongol civil war, in tandem with the rise of Dayan Khan (1473-1517) and his grandson, Altan Khan (1507-1582). Known for reuniting many Mongols under Chinggisid supremacy, Dayan Khan had subjugated many central and eastern Mongol communities by 1500. However, his rise to power was also confronted by some Mongols in the west, including a major opponent called Ibarai, who was possibly Muslim.[500] As the powerful leader of a western horde of Mongols whose military base was at the foot of Mt. Helan, Ibarai posed an obstacle for Dayan Khan. A civil war eventually broke out. Although he commanded mighty military force, Ibarai was eventually defeated when half of his troops surrendered.[501] Ibarai himself fled northwest toward his military base. But when he noticed that his base was within Dayan Khan's reach, Ibarai turned to the southeast and arrived in the highland region after bypassing Jiayu Pass, the far western end of the Ming's military defensive zone (Fig. 6.1).

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[500] Ibarai is a variant form of Ibrahim, an Arabic name common among Muslims. Wulan, *"Menggu Yuanliu" Yanjiu*, 377. But his Muslim identity was just a possibility but not a certainty because he seems to have been part of a community of Uyghurs who migrated east and settled in the Ordos area.
[501] Wulan, *"Menggu Yuanliu" Yanjiu*, 377.

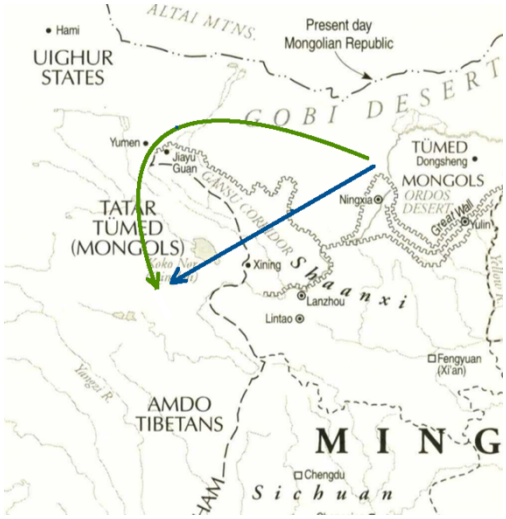

Fig. 6.1: Different Routes for Ibarai and the chasing army to arrive at *Xihai* area[502]

Though Ibarai was on the losing side in the civil war, his troops remained strong in the eyes of many Ming officials on the Gansu frontier and were treated as a destructive force and great threat to the area. One of these Ming frontier officials, named Zhang Yi, even sent gold and silk fabrics to Ibarai to bribe him to turn away to other administrative regions.[503] After some wandering around, by 1520, Ibarai and his troops gradually settled down around the Qinghai Lake, which was designated as Xihai, the "sea in the west," because of the lake's extensive size. For this reason, Mongol forces who settled down near the Qinghai Lake from then on were oftentimes deemed as "hai kou" (bandits of the sea) in Ming texts. One has to note that Ibarai was not the only Mongol leader who kept himself away from the northern steppe and settled near the Qinghai Lake. Other leaders, such as Mandulai Aqalaqu, another opponent to Dayan Khan's rule,[504] and Burqai, Dayan Khan's half-brother,[505] all left Dayan Khan's domain and moved to the Xihai region following Ibarai's routes. By

[502] Original version of the map: Mote, *Imperial China, 900-1800*, 699.
[503] *Ming wuzong shilu*, juan 100, 8th year, month V, wuchen.
[504] Baoyingdeligen, "Shi Mingdai Menggu Guan Cheng 'A Halahu Zhiyuan' He 'Die Zhiyuan': Jiankao Yuci Xiangguan de Jige Renwu."
[505] Wulan, *"Menggu Yuanliu" Yanjiu*, 282-283.

the 1540s, the steppe to the Ming's west had become a place where the losers of Mongol civil wars or rebels took shelter.

Consequently, the highland became an enclave for a large volume of Mongol immigrants. Many Mongol leaders who opposed Dayan Khan's rule formed an alliance in the face of constant pursuit from the northern steppe. Although Dayan Khan himself had already passed away at the time, his two grandsons, Mergen Jinong and Alta Anda,[506] who later received the honorific title of "Altan Khan," clearly understood the imperative to eliminate those who had fled to the highland. Therefore, in the 1520s and 1530s, they frequently sent large parties to the highland in order to completely eliminate the rebels.[507] However, the expeditionary forces did not take the detour as Ibarai had: they departed from Ordos, cut through Ming territory directly, and swiftly entered the highland region (Fig. 6.1). Although nominally belonging to the Ming, the region of the eastern part of modern-day Gansu was scarcely populated. The statewide inefficiency of the Ming's garrison system starting from the mid- to late 15th century made the military in the region even more incapable, and that is why frontier generals like Zhang Yi had to buy peace from the transient Mongols. Similar to the sparsely distributed weak troops, the frontier walls in the region were also unable to stop the Mongols: they came by tens of thousands, tearing down any walls along their way and moving on.[508] To these expeditionary Mongol troops, traversing the Ming claimed territory was just like traveling through no man's land.

The Ming military's inability to check the Mongols' movement in and out of the highland was not unknown to Ming officials. From the early decades of the 16th century, certain frontline commanders proposed and geared up for military

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[506] In Ming dynasty Chinese materials, Alta is often written as Anda (俺答). Alta, which is the non-H-form of Altan, is his personal name, meaning "golden."
[507] Dalizhabu, *Mingdai Monan Menggu Lishi Yanjiu*, 58-62.
[508] *Ming shizong shilu*, juan 117, 9th year, month IX, wusheng.

confrontation with the trespassing Mongols. On the one hand, they were busy with deploying soldiers and preparing military logistics such as purchasing horses and digging trenches.[509] On the other hand, they sent many memorials to the Ming court to ask for financial support as well as approval for their possible military actions.[510] But these radical agendas were not all favored among other officials. Many frontier officials were more cautious about launching large-scale military action after a detailed evaluation of the costs and benefits of war.[511] Others who thought the tension between different Mongol groups was a good opportunity to carry out the somewhat classic "divide and rule" strategy proposed to pacify the Mongols by gradually drawing them back into the tributary system through political and economic benefits.[512] Such prolonged discussion of frontier policies was not unique at the time: similar protracted debates had taken place at the Ming court several years earlier concerning the walling project in Ordos.[513] By 1525, the Ming court had decided to maintain a conservative position in response to the Mongols' frequent traversal of the highland by acting only in defense.[514]

The way the Ming reacted to the Mongol actions reflected this defensive stance, which included the building of an extensive new military infrastructure. According to Arthur Waldron, the 16th century marked the peak of the Ming dynasty's walling project.[515] But most walls built at the time were located in Xuanfu or Datong, regions closer to Beijing with more strategic significance, while fewer were built in more remote regions such as the northwest highland. In this area, it was military infrastructure such as forts, instead of walls, that were primarily constructed. Drawing

[509] Peng, "Xing'an laoren zishu muzhi" inXue, *Lanzhou Gujin Beike*, 30.
[510] Wang and Sun, *Huangming Zoushu Leichao*, juan 41, 239-240.
[511] Zhao, *Choubian Shu*, juan. 42, 278.
[512] Wang and Sun, *Huangming Zoushu Leichao*, juan. 41, 239-240.
[513] Waldron, *The Great Wall of China,* 122-139.
[514] *Ming shizong shilu*, juan 64, 5th year, month V, guiwei.
[515] Waldron, *The Great Wall of China,* 140-165.

on data from local gazetteers and military guidebooks, in addition to my own fieldwork, I used GIS software, namely Google Earth and ArcGis, to pin down a total of 520 military infrastructures in areas of contemporary southern Gansu and eastern Qinghai. An analysis of their spatial distribution reveals nuances about Ming China's frontier policies at the time.

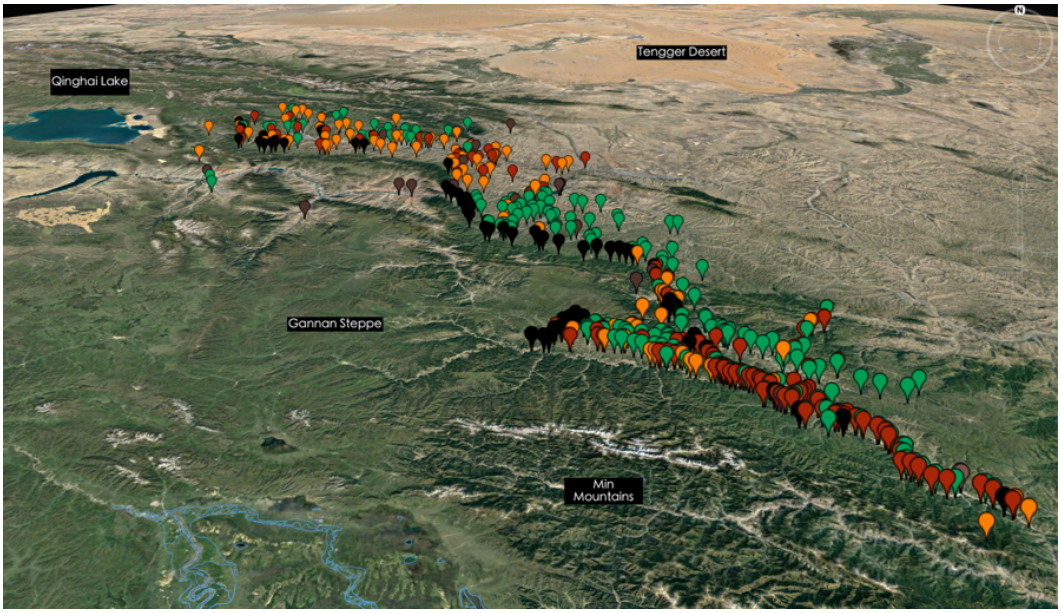

Fig. 6.2: The Spatial Distribution of 520 Military Infrastructures in the administrative zones of Hezhou, Taozhou, Minzhou, and Xining Guard[516]

Fig. 6.2 demonstrates the spatial distribution of Ming military infrastructures within the administrative zones of Hezhou, Taozhou, Minzhou and Xining Guard. These military infrastructures were not built at the same time, but most of them were constructed in the early 16th century, making possible a deep dive into the logic of mid-Ming military deployment.[517] As a defensive belt that includes various infrastructures such as fortresses (堡), guard posts (墩), hamlets (寨), mountain passes

[516] In terms of the color coding, the green pins are hamlets (寨), the red ones are guard posts (墩), the orange ones are fortresses (堡), the black ones are mountain passes (关), and the brown ones are relay stations (站).
[517] Most data of these military infrastructures are from Zhang, *Bianzheng Kao*, which was composed in 1547.Therefore, the map reflects the spatial pattern of military infrastructure in the 1530s and 1540s.

(关), river ferries (渡), and relay stations (站), the Ming empire implemented in the highland a plan which greatly resembled what was being constructed around the same time in the empire's north– the Great Wall, or, to use the contemporaneous phrase, the Nine frontier zones (九邊). One may argue that these frontier fort projects came from the similar court ideology which relied on physical military infrastructures to guard ward off nomadic Mongols. But even if they were challenged by the same type of enemies, there was much that the Ming's northern and highland frontiers did not hold in common.

Topography was one important and unique factor that characterized how the Ming constructed its defensive infrastructure in the highland. Unlike the empire's northern frontier where the terrain was flat, the Ming's western frontier was much more mountainous. Therefore, both the way that topography factored into the construction of military infrastructure and the importance of terrain varied between the two frontiers. While in the north, topography, as one among many strategic concerns, mainly determined the course of the wall, on the Ming's western frontier, it was a vital factor for to the survival of the frontier soldiers. Map 6.2 indicates that the Ming's military infrastructure was mostly constructed along the eastern edge of the steppe and the base of the mountains. The reason for this spatial pattern was not because the regime explicitly forbade its army from marching toward the steppe or an anti-steppe sentiment. Drawing on geographic and topographic data, I argue that such a spatial pattern did not stem from strategic or ideological concerns but was related to environmental constraints: constraints not posed by steppe grassland or mountain forests, but by tenuous oxygen.

To reveal the logic behind this map, I first converted a three-dimensional distribution diagram into data clusters that include the longitude and latitude of each

military construction. Then, after data mining and matching with digital elevation model (DEM), I managed to extract the altitude data of each military construction

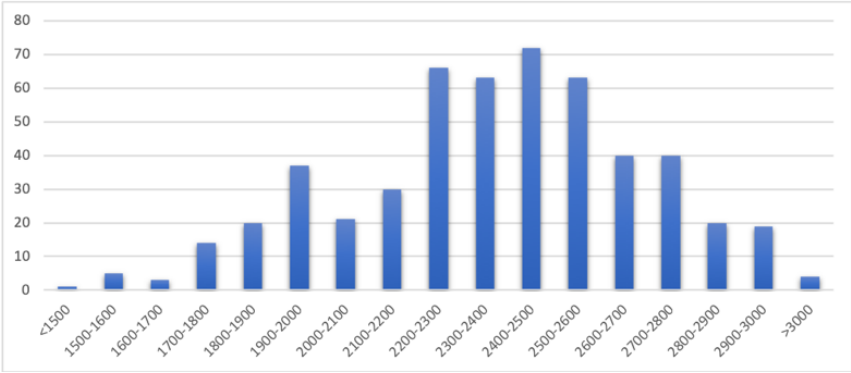

Table. 6.1: Amount of Ming Military Infrastructure by Altitude

Table 6.1 shows a bar chart that measures and groups the number of Ming military infrastructure by altitude. More than half of the military's infrastructure was built within the altitude range of 2,200 and 2,600 meters. As the altitude rises, the chance of building military construction decreases. Also, the Ming soldiers seldom chose places with an altitude higher than 3,000 meters for building stationing outposts, even if many strategic spots, such as the Qinghai Lake, were higher than 3,000 meters. In this regard, strategic concerns were not at play either. The reason behind such behaviors, I argue, is related to altitude sickness.

Altitude is a crucial factor that restrained the Ming's imperial penetration into its western frontier. Because the higher the elevation, the easier the Ming soldiers would suffer from altitude illness. Biological and medical studies have suggested that high altitude environments can result in multiple health problems for those unacclimated, such as acute mountain sickness, high-altitude cerebral edema, and high-altitude pulmonary edema. Although not recorded in Ming dynasty texts, symptoms of altitude illness such as headaches, vomiting, dizziness, or oxygen deficiency were found in Tang and Qing dynasties materials when describing human activities in the

highland.[518] Ming soldiers were not immune to these sicknesses. Contemporary studies have shown that in the Swiss Alps, symptoms of high-altitude sickness occurred only in 9% of climbers at the height of 2850 m, but increased to 13% and 34% when altitude reached 3,050 m and 3,650 m respectively.[519] One has to note that Ming soldiers in the highland were not merely hiking: they had to wear heavy armor and took on work that required intensive physical labor, such as infrastructure construction and combat. Therefore, they were much more vulnerable to altitude sickness. Taking the risk of being ahistorical, this chapter suggests that high altitude sickness constitutes one significant ecological factor that affected imperial agendas, just like how the deep forest in Qing dynasty Yunnan and the mosquitos in the early modern Caribbean islands demonstrated the agency of the environment.[520]

High altitude not only weakened Ming soldiers' physical conditions; it also affected the empire's logistics. First, farming in high altitude environments was quite difficult. Not only would dry air and low temperature damage grain yield, the barren soil of the region also rendered production quite low. Locally produced grain, as previous chapters have shown, could not meet the needs of a large army. But when it came to grain shipment, the high altitude posed great obstacles yet again. One can imagine how difficult and inefficient hard labor such as hauling grain can be in high altitude environments. This partially explains why Songpan was the most controversial military outpost in the Ming court debates, since its 2,850m altitude makes it the highest in the northwest Sichuan military zone and thus very difficult for logistics management. In the high-altitude highland region, it was the inadaptability of both

[518] Feng, "Mingdai Xizang Gongdao Yanjiu," 42.
[519] Maggiorini et al., "Prevalence of Acute Mountain Sickness in the Swiss Alps."
[520] Bello, *Across Forest, Steppe and Mountain: Environment, Identity and Empire in Qing China's Borderlands*. McNeill, *Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean, 1620-1914*.

human beings and grains to a tenuous oxygen supply that slowed the pace of Ming China's imperial expansion

The high altitude also affected the nomadic lifestyle of the Mongols in the highland. According to several Ming military housemen who were captured by the Mongols but later managed to escape, the Mongols in the highland would move southward to the steppe of northwest Sichuan for the winter and only returned to the pasture near the Qinghai Lake during summer.[521] Gradually, this became a seasonal pattern of nomadic movement for the Mongols in the highland.[522] Such a pattern, I argue, was related to the high altitude of the region as well. The Qinghai Lake area was quite elevated, and thus too cold and dry during the winter for livestock to endure. In comparison, the northwest Sichuan steppe, which was lower in both latitude and altitude, was a warmer place to herd livestock. The high altitude of the highland not only kept the Ming soldiers away, but also affected the nomadic pattern of the Mongols.

What did the highland region mean to both the Ming and Mongol regimes in the early 16th century? This section has argued that what various groups valued about the region was not the land itself, but its strategic importance. For the defeated Mongols, the highland was mainly a shelter that provided accommodation. The Ming military, in contrast, relied on the highland to construct its defensive military infrastructure in the face of the growing Mongol threat. In the meantime, the activities of both parties were affected by the local environmental conditions. Neither side could make use of the land in a more substantial manner, and it is not likely that they had developed

[521] Yang, *Yang Yiqing Ji*, 521, 611.
[522] Dalizhabu, *Mingdai Monan Menggu Lishi Yanjiu*, 54.

much of a sense of territoriality toward the highland. These changes would took place in the coming decades.

The highland was a shelter for Mongols for decades. But it was very difficult for Ibarai and his allies to hide forever as their locations were soon known to Dayan Khan and his successors. In order to completely eliminate the threats to their unification enterprise, Mongol leaders in Ordos conducted in total six expeditions from 1525 to 1550s to attack the Mongols in the highland. Although they managed to resist and survive for decades, the Mongol rebels were eventually defeated by Altan Khan in 1558, which brought an end to the long-term Mongolian schism and opened a new page for the highland's history.[523]

Highland as a Religious Realm

In the early and mid-16th century, transregional movements in the highland were prompted by the fierce Mongol civil war to which the Ming responded with passive and defensive frontier policies. With the defeat of the Mongol renegades, the highland region entered a new era of peaceful Ming-Mongol relations and laid the foundation for a Mongol-Tibetan alliance. The following two sections focus on how religious and economic factors incentivized the flow of people and how such transregional movements reflected different territorial perceptions of the highland.

From the mid-16th century, divisions began to emerge in the Mongol steppe shortly after the death of Dayan Khan, who managed to unite many individual communities for the first time in centuries. Different Mongol groups attacked each other for various reasons and interacted with the Ming individually. Out of this geopolitical fragmentation, Altan Khan gradually came into power and greatly reshaped the power dynamics in the highland.

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[523] Elverskog, *The Jewel Translucent Sūtra*, 93.

Altan Khan was born in 1508 as one of many grandsons of Dayan Khan. Despite starting from an inferior military rank, Altan Khan gradually gained reputation and power through his remarkable military achievements and became the ruler of the western wing of Mongols. In addition to eliminating the rebels in the Xihai area and subordinating Uriyangqad in the north and Oirads in the west, Altan Khan also actively consolidated his power via diplomatic and ideological means.

Diplomatically, Altan Khan endeavored to improve the relationship with the Ming. But unlike his grandfather who sought to unite all Mongols, Altan Kahn was more keen to consolidate power only in his own ulus.[524] From 1542 afterwards, Altan Khan attempted to establish trade relations with the Ming by dispatching envoys and returning Chinese captives.[525] However, the conservative Ming court, exemplified by Emperor Jiajing's extreme resentment toward the Mongols, was not interested in Altan Khan's peace-seeking gestures. Therefore, Ming-Mongol relations were highly charged throughout the xenophobic Jiajing reign (1522-1566) until the throne was passed to the relatively open-minded Longqing emperor (1567-1572). Persuaded by court ministers such as Gao Gong and Zhang Juzheng who were much more realistic toward interacting with the Mongols,[526] the Longqing emperor made up his mind to end the Mongol issue with a peace treaty in 1571.[527]

Throughout his life, Altan Khan tried to solidify his authority by drawing legitimacy from various religions. Following Mongol indigenous religions in the very beginning, Altan Khan later turned to the White Lotus religion for political

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[524] See Elverskog, *The Jewel Translucent Sūtra*, 1-63.
[525] From the Ming's perspective, the economic benefit from Ming trade was the major driving force that incentivized Altan Khan, especially after his domain was attacked by a severe natural disaster in 1542. Qu, *Wanli Wugong Lu*, 421.
[526] Waldron, *The Great Wall of China*, 184-188.
[527] Scholars have done numerous studies on the peace treaty with both Chinese and Mongolian sources. Serruys, *Sino-Mongol Relations during the Ming III*. Wada, *Mingdai Menggu Shi Lun Ji*. Zhao, *Mingchao Houqi Dui Menggu Celue Yanjiu*.

legitimation.[528] However, as was agreed in one article of the 1571 peace treaty, the White Lotus hierarchs, seen by the Ming as subversives (and therefore heretics), were extradited back to the Ming for torture and public execution.[529] From then on, Tibetan Buddhism, the Geluk sect specifically, became the dominant religion of Altan Khan's regime.[530]

In the 16th century, the Mongols, especially those in modern-day Northern Tibet and Southern Qinghai, already had close and frequent interactions with Tibetan Buddhist monks.[531] For Altan Khan himself, after encountering Tibetan Buddhism in 1558 for the first time,[532] he decided to convert to Tibetan Buddhism in 1571.[533] Although Chinese materials suggest that Altan Khan made this decision to cleanse his soul after decades of war and violence,[534] Elverskog argues that conversion into Tibetan Buddhism went along with Altan's regime-building enterprise that he was only seeking benefits for his own ulus but not the entire Mongol nation.[535] Whichever the reason was, in 1574, Altan Khan sent an envoy group with an invitation to the great Geluk sect monk, Sonam Gyatso, who was later known as the third Dalai Lama, for a meeting.

Sonam Gyatso was quite hesitant at first when he received the invitation, until a patron of the Geluk sect, Ngawang Drakpa from the Phagmodru family in central Tibet, encouraged him to accept it.[536] After all, the support from a powerful Mongol Khan could be a significant source of support for the Geluk sect's disadvantaged

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[528] About Altan's choices for different religion as his ideological source, see Lü, "Shilun Andahan Dui Yishi Xingtai de Xuanze."
[529] Qu, *Wanli Wugong Lu*, 444. Xu, "Zhao Quan Qiren."
[530] Elverskog, *Buddhism and Islam on the Silk Road*.
[531] A'wang luosang jiasuo, *Yishi Sishi Dalai Lama Zhuan*, 187. Also see Sperling, "Notes on References to 'Bri-Gung-Pa-Mongol Contact in the Late Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries," 743. Serruys, "Early Lamaism in Mongolia."
[532] Elverskog, *The Jewel Translucent Sūtra*, 108.
[533] Daoruntibu, *Xinyi Jiaozhu "Menggu Yuanliu,"* 376.
[534] Qu, *Wanli Wugong Lu*, 708.
[535] Elverskog, *The Jewel Translucent Sūtra*, 14-15.
[536] A'wang luosang jiasuo, *Yishi Sishi Dalai Lama Zhuan*, 225.

position in Tibet's fierce political and religious competition.[537] Moreover, Sonam Gyatso was looking for chances to build a diplomatic relationship with the Ming, and Altan Khan had such connections. In retrospect, Altan indeed helped to introduce Sonam Gyatso to the Ming frontier officials and court ministers afterwards.[538] Obviously for a religious leader under heavy political pressure, support from external sources was always welcome. Therefore, Sonam Gyatso accepted Altan Khan's invitation.

Upon hearing this news, Altan Khan began to prepare for the Tibetan monk's arrival. On the one hand, from 1574 to 1578, he dispatched in total five groups of Mongol envoys to greet Sonam Gyatso. Each of them was comprised of hundreds of envoys, and the last one had more than 3,000 people.[539] On the other hand, Altan Khan sent his fourth son, Bingtu, to the Xihai area to take charge of building a monastery for Altan Khan to meet Sonam Gyatso. At first, Bingtu planned to build the monastery at Wuwang Cheng, "the city of five kings" (see Map 5.3). But after a series of negotiations with the Ming, which I will elaborate on in the next section, Bingtu at last chose Chabchiyal, a site just to the south of the Qinghai Lake, to build the monastery. The entire project for the religious complex took around two years, and many laborers, craftsmen, and architecture materials were provided by the Ming.[540] In 1577 when the construction was done, the Ming also granted a Chinese name, Yanghua, to the monastery, meaning this monastery symbolized the Mongols' "admiration for China."[541]

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[537] Czaja, *Medieval Rule in Tibet: The Rlangs Clan and the Political and Religious History of the Ruling House of Phag Mo Gru Pa. With a Study of the Monastic Art of Gdan Sa Mthil*.
[538] Wei, "Andahan Dai Sanshi Dalai Lama Qiufeng Shiyi Kao."
[539] Li, *Mingdai Xihai Menggu Shi Yanjiu*, 163-166.
[540] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao,* 1097-1098.
[541] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao,* 1098.

After years of preparation, in 1578, Altan Khan finally met with Sonam Gyatso in Chabchiyal. It was said that more than one hundred thousand Chinese, Mongol, and Tibetan believers gathered for the great ceremony.[542] During the meeting, Sonam Gyatso claimed himself to be the reincarnation of Phagpa and Altan Khan the reincarnation of Qubilai Khan. In this way, he made an analogy that the alliance between himself and Altan Khan was similar to the time-honored priest-patron relationship between Phagpa with Qubilai Khan. Meanwhile, Sonam Gyatso gave the monastery a Tibetan name, *rnam par rgyal ba'i phan bde legs bshad gling*, which means "the continent of victorious and blessed teachings."[543] In return, Altan Khan designated Sonam Gyatso as "Dalai", a Mongol word that means "Ocean."[544] The meeting by Qinghai Lake was a watershed moment in the history of Mongol-Tibetan relations, and it reflected the Mongols' changed perception of the highland region.

Before the 1578 meeting, the highland was nothing more than a shelter to the Mongols. From an environmental perspective, the area was not very attractive to the Mongols simply because it was too cold. In 1559, when Altan Khan eliminated the rebels in the highland and, according to some accounts, was planning to settle for good, he could not get used to the climate and got sick; thus he went back to Ordos.[545] Probably for this reason, the Mongols did not consider the area as a land fit for the Mongols. As mentioned by Altan Khan himself, Qinghai Lake was where the Han, Mongol, and Tibetan worlds intersected, meaning that the highland region was an outside world according to traditional Mongol geographical perception.[546]

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[542] Daoruntibu, *Xinyi Jiaozhu "Menggu Yuanliu,"* 339.
[543] A'wang luosang jiasuo, *Yishi Sishi Dalai Lama Zhuan*, 237.
[544] Mongolian and Tibetan materials have different accounts of the meeting. See Okada, "The Third Dalai Lama and Altan Khan of the Tümed." For a recent discussion on Sonam Gyatso's title, see Zhu, "Shengshi Yiqie Yu Sanshi Dalai Lamade Minghao Guanxi."
[545] Chen, *Huangming Jingshi Wenbian*, 4397.
[546] Elverskog, *The Jewel Translucent Sūtra*, 145. In another letter that Altan Khan wrote to the Ming official, such an idea was expressed as: 達子漢人西番三國

However, the highland region's meaning to the Mongols radically changed after the 1578 meeting. It was no longer taken as a cold and dry temporary refuge or foreign land, but as a religious bridge that connected the Mongols to central Tibet, the sacred Buddhist realm. Therefore, although Altan Khan did not dwell long in Xihai and soon returned to the Mongol steppe after the meeting, he left quite a large number of underlings to stay in the highland region to further consolidate the politico-religious alliance with the Geluk sect Tibetans.[547] Scholars have concluded that it was not until the Qinghai Lake meeting that a large number of west wing Mongols began to migrate and settle down in the Xihai area.[548] Thus, religion was the primary incentive for the Mongols to change their perspective on the highland region.

Fig. 6.3: Mongol-patronized Tibetan Buddhist Monasteries from 1574 to 1578[549]

From the 1570s on, many Mongol activities in the highland were centered around religious affairs. Fig. 6.3 displays the Tibetan Buddhist monasteries that the Mongols built or had planned to build from 1574 to 1578. It is clear that other than the

[547] A'wang luosang jiasuo, *Yishi Sishi Dalai Lama Zhuan*, 241.
[548] Li, *Mingdai Xihai Menggu Shi Yanjiu*, 104.
[549] For the two monasteries of *Pengcuo Yanpan ling* and *Pengcuo Nanjie ling*, see A'wang luosang jiasuo, *Yishi Sishi Dalai Lama Zhuan*, 233, 239.

Wuwang Cheng site, all the other monasteries were constructed near the Qinghai Lake and, unsurprisingly, all of them were Geluk sect monasteries. In the coming decades, more monasteries were built in the area, such as Niegongchuan Si and A-wa Si.[550] However, most of them did not leave much of an imprint on history, which is probably because they were portable monasteries that fit the Mongols' nomadic lifestyle better.[551] One should also note that in addition to the Geluk sect Tibetan Buddhism, the Mongols had established a patron-priest relationship with other sects. Yet because of the Gelugpas' hegemony in historical narrative, this evidence was omitted.[552] One good example, as pointed out by Elliot Sperling, is that Chöjé Gön, a Tibetan Buddhist monastery in Dzamtang on the modern-day Sichuan-Tibet frontier south of the area covered by Fig. 6.3, was also under the patronage of the Mongols who arrived in the Xihai area in the 1570s. This monastery belonged to the Jonang sect of Tibetan Buddhism, and its monastic abbot, Gyelwa Senggé, was given numerous gifts, along with a seal and official documents from Yüngsiyebü dayičing, a lord of western wing Mongols and also an underling of Altan Khan.[553] The scarcity of existing materials does not allow for a full picture of Mongol patronage of Tibetan Buddhism in the highland region in the late 16th century, but the Mongols' intense religious engagement at the time is quite evident.

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[550] The story of Niegongchuan si will be elaborated in the following section. For A-wa Si, see Pu, *Ganqing Zangchuan Fojiao Siyuan*, 469.
[551], Charleux, *Temples, and Monastères in Inné Mongolie Temples et Monastères de Mongolia Lntérieure*, 63.
[552] See Kuijp and Tuttle, "Altan Qayan (1507-1582) of the Tümed Mongols and the Stag Lung Abbot Kun Dga's Bkra Shis Rgyal Mtshan (1575-1635)."
[553] Sperling, "Tibetan Buddhism, Perceived and Imagined, along the Ming-Era Sino-Tibetan Frontier,"165.

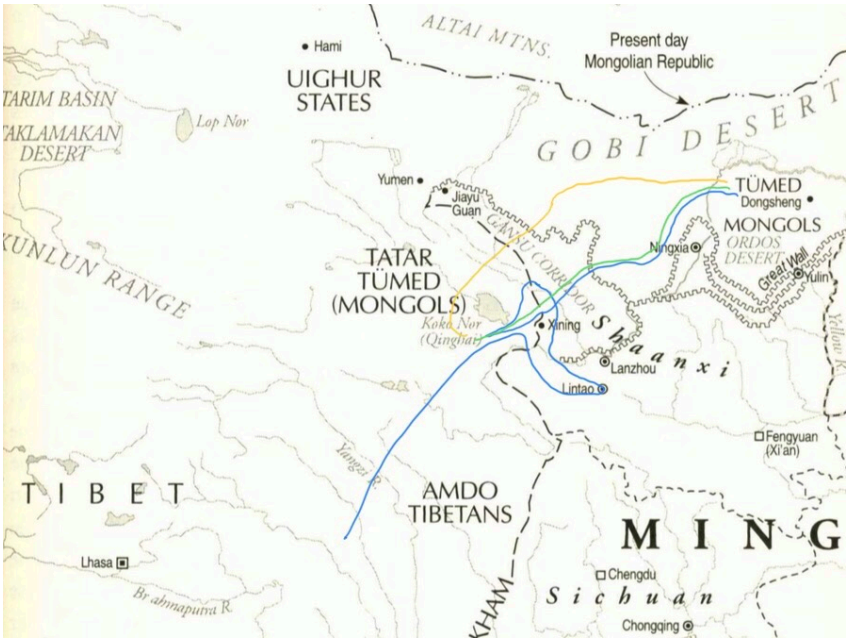

Fig. 6.4: Routes of traversing Ming Territory by Tibetans and Mongols in the 1570s and 1580s

Yellow: 1574 Mongol itinerary to the Qinghai Lake

Green: 1578 Altan Khan's round-trip itinerary for the Qinghai Lake Meeting

Blue: Third Dalai Lama's itinerary from Changdu to Tümed from 1582 to 1584

Religious factors not only played an important role in many Mongols settling down in the highland and reorganizing of their lifestyle. They also facilitated the transregional movements of many others in and out of the highland. Fig. 6.4 traces the Mongols' cross-regional itineraries from 1574 to 1584. It is clear that the western wing Mongols in the 1570s, unlike their early 16th century predecessors, did not take a detour that bypassed Jiayu Pass (Jiayu Guan) to enter the highland. Instead, they cut through Ming territory directly. Moreover, this traversal was not done by force as they were before, but with the Ming's permission under the peace treaty. In 1574, when the Mongols needed to go through the Ming territory to get to the Qinghai Lake, the

Ming's frontier official reluctantly agreed to the requests. Yet he still directed the Mongols to the less populated frontier region in modern-day Jinchang in order to keep them away from eastern Gansu, which was considered as part of the Ming heartland.[554] However, several years later, when Altan Khan himself needed to travel the Qinghai Lake and back, the Khan ignored the regulations and took the most direct route to cut through Ming territory.[555] The reason that the Ming did not overly react to such actions, other than the fact that Altan Khan was the leader of the western wing Mongols, was also related to the purpose of the Khan's trip: the Ming thought that since the Mongols were about to convert into Buddhism, a religion featuring benevolence and kindness which could keep the Mongols at peace, a minor violation of the rules would be tolerable.[556]

The loose regulation of religion-related transregional movements was even more evident in Sonam Gyatso's trip in the early 1580s, which had a long-lasting effect on the religious landscape of the highland. In 1582, Altan Khan was terribly sick and sent Mongol envoys to invite Sonam Gyatso, who by then was already known as the third Dalai Lama, to go to Tümed to carry out blessing rituals for his well-being. Yet when the third Dalai Lama arrived at the Qinghai Lake, he received news of Altan Khan's demise. Since there was no need to rush anymore, the third Dalai Lama spent the next two years wandering around the highland region preaching. He attended and held numerous Buddhist ceremonies, visited many religious sites and Mongol communities, and helped build several new monasteries.[557] From his biography, it is clear that he frequently traversed the Ming-controlled highland region and yet met no obstacles. Moreover, many monasteries that the third Dalai Lama visited during this

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[554] *Ming shenzong shilu*, juan 3, Longqing 6, month VII, wuxu.
[555] *Mingshi*, xiyu zhuan, 8547. Xiaoke, "Chelike Han Xixing Qinghai Chuyi," 5.
[556] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao,* 1097-1098.
[557] A'wang luosang jiasuo, *Yishi Sishi Dalai Lama Zhuan*, 243-245.

period, such as the Kumbum Monastery and the Youning Monastery, all became the most important Geluk monasteries in the near future. It is not an exaggeration to say that because of the support from Altan Khan, modern-day northeast Qinghai became a stronghold for the Tibetan Buddhist Geluk school by the late 16th century. And that is most likely why Sonam Gyatso later announced Altan Khan's grandson as his reincarnation, the fourth Dalai Lama.

As the Mongols were converting a rebel base into a Buddhist realm after the peace treaty, the Ming continued its earlier project—building military infrastructure. Taking the peaceful period as a golden opportunity, the Ming spent great effort to solidify its defensive fortifications in the region. In the previous decades, as the last section demonstrated, most military infrastructure the Ming constructed in the area were fortresses and watching outposts, and border walls were only erected in certain regions. But after the peace treaty, the Ming could devote more energy and funding to such projects without worrying about surprise Mongol attacks, leading to what archeologists describe as the "large-scale construction stage" of border walls in the region.[558] In the 1570s, continuous walls were constructed, especially surrounding the Xining region in order to protect the most strategically important city in the area from potential Mongol attacks.

In this regard, we can conclude this examination by noting that while the Mongols' territorial perception of the highland experienced transformative changes from a military shelter to a religious landscape, the Ming's territorial perception of the region as a military stronghold did not change in essence, only in degree. From the Ming's perspective, the Mongols' transregional movements were not harmful since they were primarily for religious purposes. By 1580, the Ming did not yet treat the Mongols as

[558] Qinghaisheng wenwu guanli ju, *Qinghai Sheng Ming Changcheng Ziyuan Diaocha Baogao*, 456.

permanent inhabitants of the highland region, and they thus allowed their traversal of Ming territory under certain conditions as a friendly gesture after the Ming-Mongol peace treaty. In the meantime, the Ming continued to emphasize the region's military value and built more defensive infrastructure. In the 1570s, the Ming still considered the highland a region that ought to be closely monitored, but the court was also willing to see its society remain autonomous. The Ming valued the region's strategic importance in the empire's Mongol diplomacy but gave less attention to the highland itself and its inhabitants.

Ripping off the Highland

One of the most important results of the 1571 Ming-Mongol treaty was the normalization of mutual trade. While the Ming interpreted this change in a typical China-centric tone in which the Mongols submitted to the Ming as a tributary sub-regime,[559] the Mongols depicted it as a moment when the Ming bought peace with various goods from the Mongols.[560] Nevertheless, exchanges of various types of goods did kick off with increasing volume and frequency after the 1570s.

Despite a game change in Ming-Mongol relations, the Ming side made various rules to normalize trade. First, trade was confined to just a few appointed markets, and they were all located around the Ming's Xuanfu, Datong, and Shanxi frontiers.[561] Secondly, no free trade was to take place in the market: the Mongols could only attend the market periodically, usually once a year, and the trade volume was technically fixed. Thirdly, each Mongol group was only allowed to trade at its specifically assigned market, and responsibilities were divided among the Mongol leaders to regulate the behavior of their underlings.[562]

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[559] Anda, "Beidi Shunyiwang Anda Xiebiao."
[560] Elverskog, *The Jewel Translucent Sūtra*, 123-126.
[561] *Ming muzong shilu*, juan 61, 5th year, month IX, guiwei.
[562] Serruys, *Genealogical Tables of the Descendants of Dayan*.

To no one's surprise, the Mongols were not satisfied with these restrictions. Therefore, in the early 1570s, they used various tactics to break through the trade limits. For example, annual trade was quite inadequate for the Mongols. Therefore, they successfully requested monthly trade from the Ming in certain frontier markets.[563] Moreover, the Mongols managed to convince the Ming to open up new markets in various places, including the highland region.

At first, the Ming did not plan to establish trade markets in the highland at all. One official noted that since there were already various indigenous groups, such as Fan people and Muslims, trading with the Ming in the highland region, allowing the Mongols to trade there would unnecessarily complicate the situation.[564] In contrast, the Mongols were eager to have markets there. They kept pushing the Ming, even to the point of making threats, for new trade markets near the highland.[565] At last, the Ming softened its attitude, but only agreed to establish one more market in Ningxia. In 1574, officials from Ming's Ministry of War declared: "Markets cannot be set up in regions to the west of Ningxia. There is nothing to trade."[566] However, this conclusion was overturned by the Mongols in less than one year.

In 1575, the Mongols successfully persuaded the Ming, if not outright forced, to open up a new market specifically for those who dwelled in the highland. They were able to do so because they bundled this trading request with a pledge for monastery construction, toward which the Ming held a relatively favorable attitude. In 1574, when Bingtu was first dispatched to the region to build a monastery for the meeting, he filed a report to the Ming about the forthcoming construction in the highland. The Ming agreed to the request, arguing that believing in Buddhism was not a bad thing

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[563] *Ming shenzong shilu*, juan 9, 1st year, month I, gengyin.
[564] *Ming muzong shilu*, juan 58, 5th year, month VI, jiachen.
[565] *Ming shenzong shilu*, juan 22, 2nd year, month II, guichou.
[566] *Ming shenzong shilu,* juan 32, 2nd year, month XII, renzi.

for the Mongols. Still, the place that Bingtu picked made the Ming nervous. He wished to build the monastery at Wuwang Cheng, an open steppe merely 150 miles away from the Ming's northwest Sichuan military base.[567] Compared to the Ming's northern frontier that was heavily consolidated during the previous decades, military defense in northwest Sichuan was still fragile. Therefore, Sichuan frontier officials were quite worried about Mongol presence and requested Bingtu to leave. But Altan Khan, the architect behind Bingyu's moves, responded that the reason for Bingtu to linger around at Ming's Sichuan frontier was that there was no trade market at Gansu, and the Ningxia market was too far away.[568] By phrasing his narrative in this way, Altan Khan implied that once there was a Gansu trade market, Bingtu would be immediately recalled.

Some Ming officials at court maintained a pragmatic attitude toward such requests. Fang Fengshi, for example, was sure that the only reason for Bingtu to hang around the northwest Sichuan steppe was to give the Ming a certain level of anxiety; it was unlikely he would lead the troops to enter the deep mountains. For Bingtu, the trade market in Ningxia was indeed quite far away. Thus, once a functional market within his reach was opened, his defiant actions would naturally quiet down.[569] Zhang Juzheng, another Ming court minister, agreed with this idea by saying that since the Fan people were allowed to trade in the highland regions, there was no reason why the Mongols shouldn't be allowed to do the same.[570] He was quite confident that various kinds of requests from the reckless Mongols could all be subtly dealt with. With the support and advocacy of these top-level officials, in 1575, a new market was established in Biandu Kou, which, according to Zhang Juzheng, was a perfect site for

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[567] Feng, "Anda Houzhi," 137.
[568] *Mingshi*, liezhuan 218. Xiyu er, xifan zhuwei.
[569] Fang, *Dayinlou Ji*, 764-765.
[570] Zhang, *Xinke Zhangtaiyue Xiansheng Shiwen Ji*, 644.

mutual trade (Fig. 6.5). It was not too close to Xining where Bingtu could easily monopolize the trade, and it was also not too far from the Ming territory so that Ming subjects would not have to take a detour to get to the market.[571] The Mongols warmly welcomed the approval of the Biandu Kou market. From 1576 to 1580, the market opened once a year, and each time for an entire month.[572] According to Li Wenjun, the trade volume was quite considerable and even comparable to that of the northern markets for the Ordos Mongols.[573]

Fig. 6.5: The spatial relationship between Wuwang Cheng and two Ming frontier markets

From the late 1570s to the early 1580s, as more and more Mongols began to settle down in the highland, the region's geopolitical function also began to change. On the one hand, it remained an important area to solidify the Mongol-Tibetan alliance. Knowing the importance of tea to the Tibetans, the Mongols in the highland

[571] Zhang, *Xinke Zhangtaiyue Xiansheng Shiwen Ji*, 653.
[572] *Daming Huidian*, 1855.
[573] Li, *Mingdai Xihai Menggu Shi Yanjiu*, 205.

frequently asked for tea from the Ming and gave it to the Tibetans as gifts to consolidate their alliance.[574] On the other hand, the region's economic function gradually came into play. It changed into a place where many Mongols settled to make their living. Such a changing role of the highland derived from the increasing economic independence of highland Mongols from their Ordos compatriots. As previously mentioned, each Mongol group could only trade at one specific market. For the highland Mongols, it was the Biandu Kou market per Bingtu's earlier request.[575] The Ming even announced that all the markets in the northwest frontier would have the exact same opening and closing dates in case any Mongol group attempted to commute between different markets for more trading opportunities.[576] Therefore, to trade with the Han people for various daily necessities, the Mongols in the region could only rely on the local land to raise livestock such as horses, instead of herding them from other regions. To feed themselves, they need to know the local pastures well in order to raise enough good-quality horses to trade with the Ming. The relatively higher price for horses at the Biandu Kou Market provided further incentive for the Mongols to work hard on the land.[577] In this vein, the Mongols in the highland began to pay more attention to the region for the sake of their livelihood instead of religious reasons.

In 1578 when the meeting between Altan Khan and the third Dalai Lama ended, many Mongols returned to Ordos with Altan Khan. Yet at the same time, many others chose to stay in the pastures near the Qinghai Lake and began to treat the highland region as their new home. In this regard, we see that the nature of the highland in the eyes of the Mongols changed one more time. The place was transformed from a

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[574] *Ming shenzong shilu,* juan 67, 5th year, month IX, yiwei. Zheng, "Fuyi Jilue," 157.
[575] Serruys, *Genealogical Tables of the Descendants of Dayan*, 74.
[576] *Ming shenzong shilu,* juan 43, 3rd year, month X, renshen.
[577] Zheng, "Fuyi Jilue," 157.

shelter for rebels, to a venue imbued with religious sacredness, to a piece of land on which make a living. Fom then on, the Mongols in the highland poured in much effort to make the region prosper.

After 1578, the Mongols who remained in the highland used multiple methods to benefit from the land. First, they brought more horses to the market regardless of the fixed trading number set by the Ming. The Ming usually accepted the excess horses to demonstrate their generosity, warning the Mongols that the fixed quota should be strictly obeyed, only to pardon their violations again the next time.[578] Second, the Mongols began to sell horses of inferior quality to the Ming. In 1583, a Gansu frontier commander reported to the court that the horses traded by the Mongols were either old or too skinny, and these feeble horses often died during military drills.[579] Such situations also existed in frontier markets in the north.[580] Third, having one trade market opened up for them, the Mongols in the highland wished to have more. In 1578, Bingtu requested to establish a market in Taozhou, in addition to Biandu Kou, for his underlings to trade.[581] The Ming rejected his demand. One year later, Altan Khan himself raised the same request to the Ming, but it is unlikely to have been successful as there was no records of trade there in the Ming documents.[582] In 1584, Bingtu made the request again and wished to have not only Taozhou, but also Hezhou as legitimate trade markets.[583] Although the Ming did not agree to these demands, they reflected the highland Mongols' eagerness to have more trading opportunities with the Ming.

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[578] *Ming shenzong shilu,* juan 72, 6th year, month II, wuxu.
[579] *Ming shenzong shilu,* juan 136, 11th year, month IV, jiazi.
[580] *Ming shenzong shilu,* juan 33, 2nd year, 12th year, month VII, yihai.
[581] *Ming shenzong shilu,* juan 74, 6th year, month IV, dinghai.
[582] *Ming shenzong shilu,* juan 84, 7th year, month II, kuisi.
[583] *Ming shenzong shilu,* juan 154, 12th year, month X, renxu.

The demands that highland Mongols made on the Ming attest to the development of their communities in the early 1580s. The Mongols gradually became accustomed to the highland natural environment. Therefore, they were able to increase horse production. In the meantime, they settled down well and thus needed more daily necessities which could only be acquired from the Ming. As pointed out by one Ming official, the Mongols "herd their livestock in the region, produce and raise their children in the region. Drinking the sweet water and enjoying the rich pasture, these Mongols begin to treat their northern base as a desert…there were all sorts of things that exist in the Xihai area but not the north steppe."[584] In the early 1580s, the Mongols actively exploited the highland region for economic purposes.

As the Mongols grew stronger in the highland, they began to act more aggressively and even challenged the peace treaty. Some of their reckless behaviors were checked when Altan Khan was still in power. In 1581, some underlings of Bingtu trespassed on the Ming territory, murdered several Han civilians, and plundered their property and livestock. The Ming, instead of going after Bingtu, asked Altan Khan to regulate his subjects better. With Altan Khan hastening Bingtu for an explanation, Bingtu eventually apologized and accepted the Ming's penalty.[585] But once Altan Khan passed away in 1582 and his successor died a mere three years later, the power dynamics in the highland shifted. In 1586, Altan Khan's grandson, Namudai Jirüke Qong Tayiji, nicknamed Cherik (扯力克) in the Ming texts, became the nominal lord of the western wing Mongols. However, as a relatively young leader, Cherik was not adequately recognized and thus less capable of keeping all his underlings under

[584] Chen, *Huangming Jingshi Wenbian*, 4388.
[585] *Ming shenzong shilu,* juan 113, 9th year, month VI, jiayin.

control.[586] Therefore, in the 1580s, the Mongol groups in the highland began to act on their own.

Various Mongol groups in the highland region deepened their exploitation of the local land, especially by squeezing its indigenous inhabitants, the Fan people. Because of the restraints of the Ming-Mongol peace treaty, the Mongols were technically not allowed to plunder the Han people.[587] Moreover, many of them were worried that raiding the Han people increased the possibility of getting contaminated of small pox,[588] a deadly disease for low-density, non-resistant populations like the Mongols, but one to which higher-density Chinese populations typically were resistant since childhood. In comparison, raiding the Fan people was less risky. As mentioned in the previous chapters, it is clear that the Fan people in the highland accumulated much wealth in their centuries-long interactions with the Ming through trade, the tributary system, or simply plunder. Therefore, they became prime targets in the eyes of the Mongols.[589] When Altan Khan was alive, he still had the authority to stop highland Mongols from plundering the Fan in case it violated the peace treaty.[590] Yet as soon as he passed away in 1852, such violent actions resurged.

In the 1580s, the power dynamic between the Mongols and the Fan people in the highland was tremendously reshaped. Conflicts over pastures were frequent, and plundering became the most convenient way to acquire daily necessities. In 1583, the Mongols raided certain Fan communities, murdering and injuring more than 1,000 people and removing more than 4,000 livestock.[591] In 1584, eight communities of Fan people ran to the Ming's frontier military for protection after being attacked by the

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[586] *Mingshi*, juan 330.
[587] Chen, *Huangming Jingshi Wenbian*, 4185.
[588] Qu, *Wanli Wugong Lu*, 689.
[589] Chen, *Huangming Jingshi Wenbian*, 4388.
[590] Chen, *Huangming Jingshi Wenbian*, 3416.
[591] Li, *Mingdai Xihai Menggu Shi Yanjiu*, 153.

Mongols.[592] Although some Fan groups were courageous enough to fight against Mongols and even killed some Mongol leaders, many others just ran away.[593] According to Li Wenjun, the Fan people who fled from the highland in the late 16th century migrated toward the east, west, and north, and thus left their fine pastures to the growing number of Mongols.[594]

More and more Fan people submitted to and then acknowledged the Mongols' power. Some formed inter-marriage relationships with the Mongols to keep themselves safe,[595] and others gave up their property.[596] The Mongols treated these new subordinates as resources for extraction. They requested the Fan people to pay "*tianba*," which was a tax in kind of 10% of the grain, livestock and cloth or whatever they produced.[597] Even the Han people scattered in the highland submitted *tianba* to the Mongols to buy peace.[598] The wealth accumulated through these means undoubtedly improved the conditions of the highland Mongols. In 1586, some Mongols went to the Ming's frontier town to ask for goods, including silk fabrics for hats, musical instruments such as pipa and guzheng, grapes, leather suitcases, rice, and wheat. Moreover, they claimed that they wanted hundreds of bags of these items at the least.[599] It seems that the living quality of the Mongols had already greatly improved as they started to demand opulent goods instead of daily necessities. Moreover, there are records that the Mongols traded extra horses and other livestock not only to the Ming, but also Muslims from the west.[600] By the late 1580s, the Mongols had successfully taken root in the highland and prospered.

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[592] *Ming shenzong shilu,* juan 146, 12th year, month II, jiazi.
[593] Qu, *Wanli Wugong Lu*, 691.
[594] Li, *Mingdai Xihai Menggu Shi Yanjiu*, 224.
[595] Chen, *Huangming Jingshi Wenbian*, 4185.
[596] Chen, *Huangming Jingshi Wenbian*, 4185.
[597] Mao, *Huangming Xiangxu Lu*. 668.
[598] Chen, *Huangming Jingshi Wenbian*, 4403.
[599] Qu, *Wanli Wugong Lu*, 528.
[600] Qu, *Wanli Wugong Lu*, 536.

While the Mongols gradually converted the highland into a settlement with compliant subjects and rich resources, the Ming still treated the region and its inhabitants as part of the barbaric world and therefore did not care so much about its annexation by the Mongols. On the contrary, they were aware of and even somehow helped along the Mongols' penetration of the highland. Receiving reports about the Mongols' attack on Fan people, Sheng Shixing, the leading cabinet minister at the time, suggested to the Ming's frontier official that "if the Mongols are merely plundering the raw barbarians, just ready the military as a preparation; but if it is the Han people and their property that are damaged, then you shall send out the army to pursue them."[601] Gao Gong, another top-level official even claimed that the Mongols' attack on the Fan people was quite understandable: "Since we do not want the Mongols to raid us, it is inhumane to forbid the Mongols from plundering the Fan!"[602] Such attitudes certainly emboldened the Mongols to continue exploiting the Fan people in the highland since they knew where the Ming's bottom line lay.

Moreover, Ming frontier officials allowed the Mongols to traverse the territory technically under the Ming's control to conduct various activities. During Altan Khan's time, the so-called "borrowing routes" (借路) were still a form of diplomatic interaction that involved the circulation of official documents between the Mongol Khan and the Ming's top bureaucrats. But over time, traversing the Ming's territory to enter the highland gradually evolved from a diplomatic protocol into common practice.[603] On the ground, it was reduced to a custom that the Mongols took as a natural and normal request, and even the Ming's frontier military found it no big deal. The Mongols gradually developed multiple routes to cut through the Ming territory to

[601] Shen, *Lunfei Jiandu*, 289.
[602] Gao, "Furong Jishi," 71.
[603] Chen, *Huangming Jingshi Wenbian*, 4372.

enter the highland.[604] Each time, regardless of whether it was for hunting, plundering the Fan, or other business, the Mongols would find some excuse and ask for rewards from the Ming. The Ming officials, in comparison, by then had become sluggish due to the long peace and stopped fixing and building their military infrastructure. They frequently took bribes from the Mongols for their borrowing route demands and even prepared banquets for them as long as they did not cause trouble during the journey.[605] In the 1580s, the Ming's attitude toward the highland region was not even comparable to previous decades when an active defensive policy was in effect. In the 1580s, the Ming simply did not care about the highland territory or its inhabitants.

From Borderland to Border

In 1588, one high-ranking military commander of Xining, Li Kui, got himself involved in a Mongol-Fan clash and was eventually killed by the Mongols. The Ming court officials knew it was primarily Li Kui's fault as he should have not intervened in the Mongols' raiding business, especially while drunk, but such a conflict allows us to imagine the precarious power dynamics on the ground.[606] While the Mongols were getting increasingly stronger and therefore aggressive, the Ming military were told to keep their distance from the Mongols and maintain a defensive position. It seems that the clash between the Mongol forces and the Ming was only a matter of time. This section examines the Ming-Mongol interactions in the highland in this context. In particular, I argue that the transformation of the region from a borderland to a border was one outcome of these clashes.

In the late 1580s, other than Bingtu who was old and soon died, Qolachi (火落赤) was another powerful Mongol leader in the highland. Following Altan Khan's order

[604] Chen, *Huangming Jingshi Wenbian*, 4372.
[605] Chen, *Huangming Jingshi Wenbian*, 4375-4376.
[606] Shen, *Lunfei Jiandu*, 288.

to stay in the highland as an intermediary between Mongol and Tibet,[607] Qolachi gradually became powerful after receiving his deceased brother's underlings.[608] Moreover, his name frequently shows up in Ming texts because of, among other reasons, his pompous personality. Qolachi was quite a character. He not only asked for the title of "king" from the Ming,[609] which previously was granted only to Altan Khan and his successors, but also publicly announced that he could easily take over the Ming's entire northwest frontier if he wanted.[610] As a swaggering and ambitious leader, Qolachi was insatiable and considered the plundering of the Fan people unsatisfying. Therefore, he invited Cherik to the highland to plan something bigger.[611]

When Cherik was informed of Qolachi's plan in 1589, he was still in Ordos. To get to the highland quickly, Cherik and his wife, who is usually referred as "the third lady" (三娘子), jointly wrote a letter to the Ming court, asking for permission to borrow routes and traverse the Ming territory. With a humble tone, the couple raised three reasons for the request. First, the border clashes that led to Li Kui's death two years prior had greatly sabotaged the hard-earned peace between the Ming and Mongols, and the couple desired to go and tackle the conflict as soon as possible. Second, the western wing Mongols were recently attacked by the Oirads in the west, and thus Cherik needed to traverse the Ming territory to lead the punitive expedition. Third, the third Dalai Lama had recently passed away while he was preaching in the Mongol steppe. Therefore, Cherik needed to escort his ashes back to Tibet for Buddhist rituals. Believing these requests reasonable, Cherik asked for some subsidies from the Ming and pledged to keep the trade market functional during his absence.[612]

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[607] A'wang luosang jiasuo, *Yishi Sishi Dalai Lama Zhuan*, 241.
[608] Li, *Mingdai Xihai Menggu Shi Yanjiu*, 114.
[609] Shen, *Lunfei Jiandu*, 362.
[610] Yu, *Xiyu Kaogu Lu*, 275.
[611] Shen, *Lunfei Jiandu*, 361.
[612] *Ming shenzong shilu,* juan 211, 17th year, month V, yisi.

Despite there being no consensus in the Ming court,[613] the Mongol Khan was eventually granted permission.[614] Later that year, Cherik and his underlings arrived at the Yanghua Monastery.

Knowing that Cherik had arrived in the highland, Qolachi was quite excited. It was said that he even paid daily visits to Cherik's tent to discuss various matters.[615] Soon, Cherik began to dispatch troops, prepare boats to cross the Yellow River, and claim that he was going to mount a large-scale raid in the area.[616] In 1590, the Mongols began to attack the Ming's highland frontier, especially Taozhou and Songpan. The Ming border troops tried to defend their territory but were met with a disastrous defeat: they lost dozens of battles, in which several high-ranking military commanders were killed, including one called Li Lianfang who enjoyed great reputation both in the court and among the local troops. The frontier crisis greatly shocked the Ming Emperor Wanli, who immediately requested a detailed report from grant minister Sheng Shixing to find a solution.[617] From then on, just as Emperor Wanli reminded Sheng Shixing, "We should not please the barbarians any more,"[618] the Ming began to revise its defensive policy, claiming that it was time to "cut off the barbarian's right arm."[619] After the 1590 frontier crisis, with its "right arm" becoming stronger, the Ming decided to turn to military actions for a solution.

To solve the highland Mongol issue once and for all, the Ming assigned Zheng Luo (鄭洛), the supreme commander of the Xuanfu and Datong military districts, to be the superintendent of the western frontier region.[620] Once Zheng Luo arrived at the

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[613] *Ming shenzong shilu*, juan 205, 16th year, month XII, gengzi.
[614] Xu, *Xianzhang Waishi Xubian*, 665.
[615] Qu, *Wanli Wugong Lu*, 495.
[616] Qu, *Wanli Wugong Lu*, 495.
[617] *Wanli Dichao*, 524-525.
[618] *Wanli Dichao*, 524-525.
[619] Gu, *Ming Shilu Zangzu Shiliao*, 1126.
[620] Yang, *Xining Fu Xinzhi*, 740-741.

highland, he noticed that the Mongols had become rampant in the highland for two reasons: they came and went through the Ming territory freely, and their exploitation of the indigenous Fan people was unrestrained.[621] This points to the Ming's lack of attention to both the highland and its inhabitants. It was the Ming's loose attitude in previous decades toward various transregional movements in the highland, especially in the context of the Mongol-Tibetan alliance, which resulted in a series of frontier crises. Therefore, Zheng Luo devised a three-step plan to take the region back from the Mongol control: checking the Mongols' transregional movements, taking back control over the highland inhabitants, and eliminating the Mongols' influence in the region.

Zheng Luo first issued strict control over the "borrowing routes" requests through which the Mongols wished to traverse the Ming's Gansu territory to enter the highland. He pointed out that the recent chaos caused by Qolachi and other Mongol leaders could be traced back to the permission they received to cut through Ming territory to get to the highland. It was because of the Ming's loose control over such requests that the Mongols were able to conceal themselves in the highland and covetously exploit the region.[622] Therefore, from then on, they could only take the detour from the Jiayu Pass if they needed to go to the highland. Ming territory was not open to their passage anymore. If they insisted on forcing their way through, serious consequence awaited them.[623] Obviously not all Mongol leaders were intimidated by Zhang Luo's warning; when a Mongol figurehead named Bushitu attempted to muscle his way through, Zheng Luo dispatched a heavy army to attack the Mongols and drove them away.[624]

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[621] Chen, *Huangming Jingshi Wenbian*, 4381.
[622] Chen, *Huangming Jingshi Wenbian*, 4372-4373.
[623] Chen, *Huangming Jingshi Wenbian*, 4373.
[624] *Ming shenzong shilu,* juan 231, 19th year, month I, wuwu.

While those who wished to enter the highland were forbidden to do so, those who left the highland could still borrow the routes from the Ming.[625] In fact, Zheng Luo wished to see more Mongols leave the region, particularly Cherik. Zheng Luo knew that the arrival of Cherik had invigorated the highland Mongols and fueled their aggressive actions. Therefore, he decided to force Cherik to leave the highland first. In the beginning, Zheng Luo informed Cherik that if he continued to linger in the highland, the court rewards for him would be suspended, and the frontier market where his subjects acquired their daily necessities would be closed.[626] Cherik did not care. He even began to lobby other Mongol leaders to break with the Ming.[627] Seeing that threats of cutting off the Mongol's economic supply did not work, Zheng Luo turned to political means to regulate them. He wrote Cherik a letter and informed him of the possibility of granting more Mongol leaders the title of "king."[628] This made Cherik nervous because it would sabotage his prestige if other Mongol leaders were upgraded from Cherik's underlings to his equals. Cherik weighed the political situation and eventually decided to go back to Ordos. He did not want to risk his political privilege for some meager plunder. Qolachi, undoubtedly, was strongly against Cherik's departure ideas. He knew that the Mongol leader's leave would greatly weaken the highland Mongols, and therefore he "frequently went to Cherik's tent and used one hundred ways to persuade him to stay, including his big plan to take over the Ming's entire highland frontier."[629] But Cherik still left later that year, a move that Ming officials commented was a result of the "Ming's king-changing plans."[630]

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[625] Chen, *Huangming Jingshi Wenbian*, 4372.
[626] *Ming shenzong shilu*, juan 226, 18th year, month VIII, guiyou.
[627] Qu, *Wanli Wugong Lu*, 497.
[628] Qu, *Wanli Wugong Lu*, 498.
[629] Qu, *Wanli Wugong Lu*, 499.
[630] Qu, *Wanli Wugong Lu*, 499.

Dividing the highland Mongols by convincing Cherik to leave, Zheng Luo wished to further weaken them by winning the Fan people back. As the previous section points out, the Ming gave away the Fan people as one way to keep the Mongols from raiding Ming's frontier subjects. Considering the disappointment of the Fan people when treated by the Ming generals in this way, it is unsurprising to see that numerous Fan people began to work for the Mongols against the Ming. Fan spies who were helping the Mongols were frequently captured by the Ming soldiers. In another memorial, Zheng Luo notes that the Fan people even made up more than half of the Mongol forces in the highland.[631] It became clear to Zheng Luo that duly handling the Fan people would be decisive for his overall strategy to settle the troubles caused by the highland Mongols.

Many civil officials in the frontier also raised their opinions in support of embracing the highland Fan people for the sake of weakening the Mongols. Overall, it was widely believed that there were many benefits for doing so. First, the scholars argued that the policy went along with the conventional geopolitical strategy: the enemy of my enemy is my friend. The Ming could take advantage of the clashes between the Fan and the Mongols and therefore weaken the Mongol threat. Once the Fan became stronger with the support of the Ming, the Mongols' rampant actions in the highland would die down as well. Second, improving the relationship with the Fan could result in a constant supply of leather, meat, dairy products, and timber to the Ming's frontier society, which were military and daily necessities that were previously confiscated by the Mongols. Third, being friendly and protecting the Fan from Mongol exploitation would play an important role in the long-running process of converting them into the Ming's formal subjects, which would be vital for the Ming to

[631] Wang, *Qinghai Fangzhi Ziliao Leibian*, 647.

secure the frontier.[632] To comply with these ideas, Zheng Luo devised the plan of "pacifying the Fan, welcoming the Fan, and encouraging the Fan."[633] He believed that the Fan was an underestimated group whose hatred toward the Mongols should be made full use of to weaken the Mongols' power in the highland.

Collecting suggestions from his civil advisors, Zheng Luo began to use multiple methods to foster intimacy with the highland Fan people. For example, he promised rich material rewards of tea, grain, and cloth for those who fought the Mongols or stole their horses for the Ming.[634] Also, he agreed to provide materials and labor to build defensive fortresses for the Fan communities and offered military protection.[635] It was said that with his proactive policy, more than 80,000 Fan people from nearly two hundred highland communities submitted to the Ming in the first several years of the 1590s. Even many alleged raw barbarians deserted from the Mongols' control and subordinated themselves to the Ming.[636] To the people at the time, this was an accomplishment that could pacify the region for at least another half-century.[637]

While the Ming texts highly praise Zheng Luo's efforts in appealing to the Fan people and thus successfully encouraging them to break their alliance with the Mongols, I argue that what is depicted is more propaganda than objective picture and may be inaccurate in certain ways. What really took place in the highland is most likely enhanced Ming control over the indigenous Fan people through coercive actions with military intervention. Close surveillance, control over material goods, and forced conscription were all very likely measures adopted by the Ming's frontier military to cut off the Fan people's contact with the Mongols. Moreover, the 80,000

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[632] Chen, *Huangming Jingshi Wenbian*, 4378.
[633] Chen, *Huangming Jingshi Wenbian*, 4379-4380.
[634] Qu, *Wanli Wugong Lu*, 541.
[635] Qu, *Wanli Wugong Lu*, 542.
[636] Chen, *Huangming Jingshi Wenbian*, 404-405.
[637] Zhang, *Longyou Jinshi Lu*, 84.

Fan people's submission is also not likely to be a factual number. Instead, it is highly possible that eighty communities surrendered to the Ming, and these communities' leaders all received official titles of chiliarch (千户) from the Ming, and the numbers were taken from their nominal command number. If they were really converted into the Ming's subjects, there should have vastly more records attesting to the fact. Nevertheless, local gazetteers indicate that after the Ming army's active campaigns, some Fan communities migrated to the east toward the Ming territory and began to submit horses to the Ming yearly;[638] others, once submitted to the Ming, experienced what was literally called "opening up the community" under the command of Zheng Luo.[639] These changes on the ground, if not understood as stemming from the Fan people's volition, should be interpreted as a form of social categorization and jurisdictional registration forcefully imposed by the Ming. The purpose of these measures was to tighten the Ming's control over the Fan communities so as to weaken the Mongols and avoid the appearance of a real border crisis.

A similar gap between the Ming's politically charged narrative and what really happened on the ground existed in other parts of the highland as well. In northwest Sichuan, when the indigenous Fan people attempted rebellion and were suppressed by the Ming in the 1580s, we also see narratives of a certain pattern that are riddled with China-centric discourses: the non-Han people surrendered to the Ming's mighty military power, petitioned to have the Ming's mercy, received Chinese surnames, learned the Han-Chinese language, adopted the Chinese dressing style, and wished to be the Ming's subjects.[640] Modern scholars often deem these records biased because they were written by Chinese officials and thus by nature had a Sino-centric

[638] Liu, *Xining Wei Zhi*, 67.
[639] Liu, *Xining Wei Zhi*, 64-65.
[640] Yuan, *Quanshu Bianyu Kao*, 439.

inclination. However, putting their cultural aspect aside, I argue the much more important and less exaggerated content in such records reflects the changing political identity of the Fan people from the Ming's dependents into the Ming's subjects. In northwest Sichuan, the Fan people were incorporated into the late Ming grassroots administrative system, the *baojia* system.[641] In eastern Qinghai and southern Gansu, they became the Ming's "ears, eyes, and wings" to fight with the Mongols.[642]

In Zheng Luo's understanding, the Mongols grew rampant in the highland for two reasons: they came and went through the Ming territory freely and their exploitation of the indigenous Fan people went unrestrained.[643] Adopting multiple methods, Zheng Luo checked these two issues to a certain degree by the early 1590s. In the meantime, Zheng Luo also attempted to convert a highland with dense Mongol characteristics into a region culturally influenced by the Ming, especially in the religious aspect.

When Zheng Luo turned his attention to the highland Mongols, Qolachi attracted much of his focus. What prompted Zheng Luo to take action was Qolachi's attempt to build a huge monastery quite close to the Ming's territory. Qolachi himself was a devoted Tibetan Buddhist practitioner. When the third Dalai Lama bypassed the highland in 1584 to go to Ordos for the ritual after Altan Khan's death, he stayed in Qolachi's lands and enjoyed his warm hospitality.[644] In 1587, Qolachi wrote to the Ming to ask for materials and labor to build a monastery in his domain but was rejected.[645] In addition to religious reasons, Qolachi must have already noticed the political functions of such religious sites: they could not only boost Qolachi's personal prestige, but also attract many potential able-bodied men to gather together.

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[641] Yuan, *Quanshu Bianyu Kao*, 56-57.
[642] Liu, *Xining Wei Zhi*, 79.
[643] Chen, *Huangming Jingshi Wenbian*, 4381.
[644] A'wang luosang jiasuo, *Yishi Sishi Dalai Lama Zhuan*, 245.
[645] *Ming shenzong shilu,* juan 187, 15th year, month VI, dingmao.

In 1590, as Qolachi frequently attacked Ming towns and fortresses, he decided to build a monastery on his own and chose a place just outside the Ming's military zone. With this religious complex as a stronghold, Qolachi intended to construct a political-religious center to ground his control over the region and further his challenge of the Ming.

To prepare for the construction, Qolachi sent one of his sons to the nearby mountains in the Ming's Sichuan province to collect timber. Source indicate that in total the Mongols cut down tens of thousands of huge trees and piled them at the construction site waiting for the project to kick off.[646] Informed of Qolachi's plan, the Ming was quite anxious as the monastery would gather many Mongols, just as the Yanghua Monastery did, and it would expose the entire region to Qolachi.[647] Zheng Luo decided to eliminate the threat before it sprouted. In 1590, when the Mongols were preparing for the seasonal movement and Qolachi was away, Zheng Luo dispatched a small number of Ming troops to sneak into the construction site under the cover of dark and set fire to the timber supply the Mongols had gathered. With the help of a heavy wind, all the construction materials burned up as the Mongols were unable to put out the fire.[648]

Having successfully destroyed the unfinished monastery and thus considerably weakened Qolachi, Zheng Luo had a clear idea of the Tibetan Buddhist monasteries' geopolitical importance to the highland Mongols. Therefore, he further planned to have the Yanghua Monastery, a site of much greater geopolitical and religious significance, burned down as well. Because the Yanghua Monastery was nominally under the Ming's patronage, Zheng Luo sent a memorial to the Ming court before

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[646] Qu, *Wanli Wugong Lu*, 536.
[647] *Wanli Dichao*, 527-528.
[648] Qu, *Wanli Wugong Lu*, 540.

making a move. He argued that the Mongol threat in the highland had grown bigger and bigger. They came to the highland and settled down in the name of Buddhist pilgrimage, but their true purpose was to subordinate the local Fan people. Yanghua Monastery was the deepest root of all these problems. If they wished to solve the Mongol problems in the the highland, the monastery must be torn down.[649] With a determined tone, Zheng Luo claimed that destroying Yanghua Monastery was critical. The Ming court granted him permission. In 1591, Zheng Luo dispatched a large army for a surprise attack on the Yanghua Monastery, set the entire religious complex on fire, and defeated the Mongols who came to save the monastery. Successfully destroying the stronghold of the highland Mongols, Zheng Luo was ecstatic and even wrote several poems to commemorate his success.[650] The loss of the Yanghua Monastery was a major blow to the highland Mongols, resulting in their low morale as well as a series of defeats in the ensuing clashes with the Ming.[651]

Having Zheng Luo burn down the Tibetan Buddhist monasteries controlled by the Mongols, the Ming did not leave a religious vacuum in the highland. Instead, it filled the void by portraying itself as a legitimate patron of Tibetan Buddhism. The most typical example came from the Zhenzhu Monastery of Guide (贵德珍珠寺). In 1597, an inscription was carved onto a stone tablet in the monastery. Quite strangely, as pointed out by Chen Qinying and Ma Lin, the content of the inscription seems to have nothing to do with the monastery itself: it is completely concerned with the history of one Buddhist statue of Shakyamuni preserved in contemporaneous Beijing.[652] The inscription begins with Buddhism's early history when the statue was claimed to have

[649] Su, *Xining Zhi*, 235.
[650] Yang, *Xining Fu Xinzhi*, 1524-1525.
[651] Liu, *Xining Wei Zhi*, 75-76。
[652] Ma and Chen, "Qinghai Guide Zhenzhusi Beiji," 1.

been made. Then, it describes how the statue circulated to and within China over time and arrived at the Jiufeng Monastery in Beijing some 2,580 years after its original casting. Throughout the text, there is not even one word about Buddhist developments in either Tibet or Mongol, not to mention the highland region or Zhenzhu Monastery. In that case, why was it carved on a Zhenzhu Monastery stone tablet?

Chen Qinying and Ma Lin, the scholars that first studied the stone tablet, argue that this inscription indicates the Ming military's attempt to foster good relations with the Fan people during the series of military campaigns in the 1590s against the highland Mongols.[653] This is undoubtedly a correct observation. However, I wish to push the analysis one step further. I argue that the inscription not only serves the pragmatic needs of the Ming military, but also more importantly demonstrates the Ming court's wish to exert influence over the religious realm of the highland following the diminution of the Mongols' patronage over Tibetan Buddhism and the destruction of the Yanghua Monastery. Highlighting the sacredness of Beijing, the Ming capital, served this goal because the Shakyamuni statue was the embodiment of religious legitimacy.

Controlling the inhabitants and penetrating the religious realm on the frontier, the Ming also tried to exploit the highland for material resources. By the final years of the 16th century, the Ming had already taken back control over the highland and begun to make full use of its productive capacity. In 1596, a Ming official discovered an iron mine near the northern mountain of Xining and set up an iron mill there.[654] Previously, the Xining region alone would require 7,500 *jin* of iron yearly, and it all had to be shipped in from Xi'an several hundreds of miles away.[655] But the discovery

[653] Ma and Chen, "Qinghai Guide Zhenzhusi Beiji," 2.
[654] Liu, *Xining Wei Zhi*, 44.
[655] Yang, *Xining Fu Xinzhi*, 727.

of the iron mine allowed the Ming to extract natural resources locally in the highland. The official allocated 400 soldiers to build two furnaces and dozens of dorms and offices at the foot of the mountain. All the timber could be acquired from the nearby mountain, and all the iron production was used to make weapons for the highland Ming army.[656]

In the 1590s, due to the changing geopolitical situation, the Ming decided to revise its loose attitude toward territorial crossing in the highland. More attention was paid to the highland's territoriality and its inhabitants. By the end of the decade, as the Ming put more and more restraints over the movement of people, goods, and information, the highland transformed from a borderland into a border.

Summary

This chapter charts the conflict between the Ming and Mongol forces over the highland from the mid- to the late 16th century. In the first several decades, the Mongols consistently demonstrated the greater will toward the highland. Using the highland for refuge, religious pilgrimage, and their livelihood, the Mongols facilitated a complex and constant flow of people, goods, and religious ideas across the highland region. The Ming, in contrast, remained passive in the face of these movements. In one respect, this was a continuation of the Ming's general attitude toward the highland in the previous centuries, but it was also a result of the Ming- Mongol peace treaty. Such a defensive stance only shifted in the last decade of the century when the Mongols' movements in the region had spiraled out of control and evolved into a frontier crisis for the Ming. With a series of military campaigns, the Ming drove the Mongols away and also put an end to the transregional movements in the highland that had lasted for centuries.

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[656] Yang, *Xining Fu Xinzhi*, 727.

One important historical theme this chapter illustrates is a borderland's transformation into a border as territory-crossing gradually diminished. Unchecked movement characterizes a borderland. With the termination of such mobility, a borderland featuring open access morphed into a border where accessibility was strictly regulated. Through the negotiation revolving around various territorial perceptions, this chapter suggests the correlation between a regime of mobility and the essence of a frontier society. With the Mongols' withdrawal from the highland and the Ming's redefinition of the region as a zone not to be trespassed, an uncharted land finally became part of Ming empire's territory.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

This project examines the turbulent history of China's northwest Inner Asian highland from 1368 to 1600. Competing visions, as both a historical phenomenon and a conceptual tool, highlight the fluid nature of the highland and its bridging role in transregional geopolitics. Straddling different geopolitical units, the highland was a convergence zone for the constant flow of people, goods, and knowledge. While movements in and through the highland encompassed not only geographic shifts but also socioeconomic, religious-political, and environmental exchange, the meaning of the highland changed accordingly in the eyes of different social groups. This dissertation examines how communities, commodities, and information in motion led to various forms of encounter in the highland and how such encounters were initiated, regulated, and perceived. Simply put, it asks how these competing visions over the highland shaped the cultural connotations and social landscape of the highland world. Through the activities of five types of historical actors—namely Ming emperors, highland lords, Tibetan Buddhist monks, Ming deserted soldiers, and Mongol riders—this project takes the highland as a geographical and analytical unit of study in its own right. Repositioning the highland in the transregional interactions in the East and Inner Asian world, this dissertation points out that various ideas and designs for the highland shaped, and were shaped by, the highland's basic path of historical development.

Changes in the Highland from 1368 to 1600

Stretching through modern-day southern Gansu, eastern Qinghai, and western Sichuan, the highland is a mountainous upland that connects the Chinese heartland to

the Tibetan Plateau. In the mid-14th century, as a result of its steep terrain and harsh environment, the highland was only sparsely populated. However, the power dynamics in the broader East and Inner Asian spheres redefined the geopolitical role of the region. From the late 14th century on, Chinese troops were dispatched to the highland to guard the Ming empire's western frontier and secure its diplomatic interaction with the Tibetan world, while Tibetans entered the area from the west as a result of the eastward movement of Islam. The pouring of outsiders into the highland extensively reshaped the economic and social structure of the region. While the hegemony of the highland's indigenous lords gradually faded out, Tibetan Buddhist forces rose to power, infiltrated, and took root in the highland, significantly reconfiguring the highland's religious landscape and its relationship with the Ming's political center.

While the highland remained a non-Chinese realm in the 15th century, it was increasingly pulled into the Ming's imperial orbit since the 16th century. The Mongol civil war resulted in a large-scale Mongol migration into the highland and thus posed a threatening frontier crisis for the Ming empire. In response, the Ming began to adopt a proactive frontier policy toward the highland. By constructing more military infrastructure and dispatching more soldiers to the highland, the Ming was able to mitigate the human trafficking of captured Ming soldiers that prevailed in the highland. Yet as the number of Ming soldiers stationed in the highland increased, the desertion rate also surged. The relocation and ultimate settlement of many Ming soldiers in the highland changed the ethnic constitution of the highland population. As more and more Mongols frequently traversed the Ming-controlled Hexi Corridor and entered the highland, the region's strategic value in regional geopolitics also changed. While for the Mongols, it changed from a military shelter, to a religious realm, and

finally to a resourceful settlement, the Ming empire began to view the highland as an indispensable border instead of a semi-autonomous borderland. By the end of the 16th century, the highland region had already transformed from an uncharted middle ground where the East and Inner Asian worlds interacted to an outpost on which the Ming empire relied to regulate Inner Asian influences.

Competing Visions for the Highland

Though traditionally left out of master narratives, the highland obliges a scholarly revisiting of early modern borderland spaces. This dissertation employs "competing visions" as an analytical framework and addresses the following questions: How, when, and why did various social groups became interested in the highland? How were their actions in the highland initiated, conceptualized, and managed? And what were their practical ramifications? With diverse communities flocking into the highland with their languages, religions, commodities, and forms of knowledge in tow, the region became a place where customs, rules, and ideas were re-conceptualized. By unpacking this process, this dissertation highlights the complexity of social interactions, the fluidity of borderland spaces, and the volatility of regional geopolitics.

On the multidimensionality of encounters: "Competing visions" serves as a microscope that reveals the multi-faceted nature of certain historical phenomenon. Exchanges of material goods in the tributary system, for instance, have been treated as a mechanism through which Chinese dynasties bridled frontier regimes. Yet from those who were recognized as tribute payers in Chinese sources, such interactions meant differently. Tea, in the eyes of Ming people, was a life-sustaining daily necessity for the highland inhabitants. But in the highland, tea was not only a commodity, but also served as tokens for the brokering of political alliances, an

excuse for territorial expansion, and a catalyst for the (re)creation of social relations. As the exchange of tea encompassed a wide array of activities such as gift giving, tax collection, tribute payment, and long-distance movements, the highland setting highlights material aspects of tea that are less visible in most historical accounts. Another example is the movement of people throughout the highland. While many able-bodied men were dispatched to the region as Ming frontier soldiers, they were reduced to goods that indigenous leaders of highland communities captured for ransom or sold as slaves. In other scenarios, these Ming soldiers were treated as valuable military guides and spies by the Mongols or potential religious converts in the eyes of Tibetan Buddhist monks. The encounters in the highland demonstrate the broad range of the connotations of specific materials or behaviors in a borderland society.

On the fluidity of borderland space: Fluidity is one of the very essences of pre-modern borderland spaces. Straddling distinct geographical units and bridging multiple cultural and political spheres, the highland was a space where the connotation of certain categorical labels, such as religion and ethnicity, became contingent and flexible. As Tibetan Buddhist monks actively preached in the highland and converted many Ming subjects, the emperors found it difficult to regulate these monastic practices. There were no criteria to decide what being a Tibetan Buddhist entailed since inter-religious conversion was common and religious practices often transcended ethnic and lingual boundaries. Similar dilemmas applied to ethnicity. Although ethnic segregation was technically implemented in the highland society, it had little impact on the ground. As different groups of people comingled in the highland society, rigid labels based on supposed ethnic features such as Han, Fan, and Qiang could no longer reflect the reality in flux. Distinctions between social

categories were porous and contextual. The encounters of multiple variables made the highland society a conglomeration where everything was deconstructed, mingled, and reconstructed. It was such practical transformations that oftentimes nullified idealized lines of distinction, separation, inclusion, or exclusion that were usually imposed by alleged political centers.

On power dynamics of regional geopolitics: As middle ground for transregional social and economic interactions in peacetime and battlefields when geopolitical powers scrambled for supremacy, pre-modern borderland spaces were epicenters of geopolitical vicissitudes. This dissertation takes the highland as a lens to examine the mechanics of East and Inner Asian diplomacy. Previous scholarship has mainly taken up the tributary framework, a top-level orientation to study transregional interactions, but focused less on how exactly such interactions were carried out on a day-to-day basis. This dissertation, in contrast, investigates how cross-regional interactions were perceived, regulated, and contested in the highland, a process that enables analysis of on-the-ground geopolitical negotiations among the Chinese, Mongols, and Tibetans. Competing for hegemony became a touchstone for these regimes' political capacities, and the contestation revealed how different regimes measured the strategic value of the highland. But even though the outside powers attempted to infiltrate the highland, in reality it was oftentimes the highland inhabitants who decided how to define the region. The uncertainty and flexibility of the highland challenged familiar historical interpretations of concepts such as loyalty, rulership, and sovereignty in pre-modern Eurasian geopolitics and also pointed out the limitations of these imperial powers.

Highland as an in-between Region

Pre-modern borderland spaces were contested zones in geopolitics and, to some degree, could be even more charged than their modern counterparts demarcated by

well-defined territories and sovereignty. The highland was only one such hot spot in the interaction between China and Inner Asia. It was Ming China's outpost for laying claim over the Silk Road and was also the bridging point for the formation of a Tibetan-Mongol alliance. Encounters at this crossroads were transformative in both scale and scope. On the one hand, macroregional geopolitical crises in Ming-Mongol relations had various effects on the highland, such as escalating tension over natural resources and territory and the erection of defensive walls. On the other hand, seemingly trivial skirmishes could entirely reshuffle geopolitical power balances on a great scale as the death of a single military commander might be the last straw that led to a complete redirection of geopolitics. As the highland itself transformed from an uncharted territory into a crowded intersection, its role in geopolitics also evolved from an indifferent margin to a decisive key point.

How can a research project on a continental inland region contribute to the field of frontier studies? This dissertation emphasizes the importance of revising the current paradigm of frontier studies and promotes a comparative framework. I have argued that the framework of "competing visions" can shed new light on important historical phenomenon such as migration and diaspora or travel and cultural encounter. Moreover, the approach I have outlined gives scholars an opportunity to revisit assumptions that have characterized early modern Chinese societies as ethnically charged or socially static. Meanwhile, it has comparative potential for parallel studies on China's interaction with the southwest Zomia highland, southeast Asian maritime world, or Inner Asia through the Silk Road. These themes, together with the subaltern whose silence this project has endeavored to unmute, enables this project to appeal to a broader audience.

The conventional center-frontier framework has proven inadequate for studying the history of crossroads. Interpreting the highland as either a passive frontier subject to imperial annexation or a resilient local society resisting top-down imposition still does not fully break away from the binary framework. Therefore, this dissertation has examined the region on its own terms. Due to its distance from various geopolitical centers, the highland society was not restrained by any political principle or cultural tradition. Power balances in the region were diffuse and fragile, and human actions were not determined according to concepts like settlement and permanence. This dissertation frames a narrative in which the highland society is not passively mobilized for various regimes' ends, but shown to have significantly bent the instruments of outside regimes to its own will through its own agency. In this regard, the "frontier" in fact initiated geopolitical changes, fulfilling the traditional function of the "center," while the metropole became the passive recipient of such changes. This dissertation argues that the notion of the "frontier" as a conceptual tool peripheralizes alleged border zones and their roles in history-making. However, it was the "frontier" that shaped the nature of the "center," not vice-versa. By portraying the historical process by which the "frontier" developed on its own terms while the seeming center was at best one of many forces in this "frontier," and by eschewing the predominant center-frontier framework which silences those who inhabited the periphery, I contextualize my dissertation within postcolonial subaltern studies.

The highland serves as a fine reference for comparative studies. On one hand, it resembles other upland regions such as the southwest Asian Zomia, as these specific terrains all created societies of identity fluidity, cultural hybridity, cross-regional connectivity, and indigenous ingenuity. On the other hand, the perspective of transregional movements allows this dissertation to open a dialogue with Oceanic

studies. Oceans, as spaces away from landlocked centralizations of power, have always been spheres where the driving force for transformative exchanges, transfers, and interactions is not so much state imperatives as it is what happens on the ground. As the analytical concept of "competing visions" reveals nuances embedded in the process of material exchange, knowledge circulation, and people's movement that are otherwise lost, erased, or silenced, it provides a fine lens through which to see how geographical/spatial "in-betweens" created opportunities for new and different interactions. In this vein, this dissertation breaks new ground in a broader sense concerning borderland society and pre-modern macroregional geopolitical interaction.

Highland in the China-Tibet impasse: Past and Present

Contemporary political disputes can hamper historical research, especially that on borders, nationalism, ethnicity, and religion. This is especially the case in studies of the Chinese-Tibetan relationship. The field has been at an academic impasse primarily due to political constraints. While some scholars draw on Chinese-language materials to claim China's absolute sovereignty over Tibet throughout history, others, referencing Tibetan primary sources, assert that the historically independent plateau was only recently annexed and colonized by the communist Chinese regime in the 1950s. Such politically charged disagreements not only tremendously affect academic discourse, but also cast a shadow over the daily lives and mentality of highland inhabitants whose in-between position brings them under suspicion and pressure from both sides.

This dissertation pushes beyond these divisions by excavating the livelihood, logic, and perspectives of an understudied society. It argues that an examination of the highland on its own provides new insight into the dynamic process of how

contemporary disputes have taken shape and how historical actors have dealt with such political tension.

First, studying the history of the highland can help us better understand Ming China and Tibet from the 14th to the 16th century. For the Ming empire, the highland region was its Achilles' heel that represented the bitterness embedded in its empire-building process. The Ming empire indeed created a system in favor of the borderland's livelihood. However, to cope with the ever-changing situation on the ground, the Ming had to keep updating and tailoring its imperial policy. Such constant adaptation became a significant component of its empire-building process. In this regard, the highland exemplifies the predicaments that imperial China had to grapple with. Its endeavor to construct a multi-ethnic universal empire inadvertently helped to establish the grounds for a separatist consciousness among its frontier subjects. The extension of the state apparatus eventually backfired and created a huge political burden for the empire.

Examining the social dynamics of the highland also allows for a revisit of the nationalist framework that dominates Tibetan history studies. In the historiography of Tibetology, the highland has always been seen as the eastern periphery that only receives influence, particularly in the religious manner, from central Tibet. This Lhasa-centric view greatly underestimates the variety of social structures in the Great Tibetan world. Unlike other Tibetan regions such as Bhutan or central Tibet where secular rulers were subordinate to the ecclesiastical forces, in the highland region, the hegemony resided in the authority of lay figureheads but not in the religious clergy. Such reversed power dynamics enabled a reconsideration of the effectiveness of Tibet's religious sovereignty claim, and more importantly, opens the door for another

type of historical narrative that is different from the conventional heavily religion-charged history.

Understanding the history of the highland as an indispensable part of the Chinese-Tibetan borderland helps to situate the Chinese-Tibetan relationship in a historical context. By tracing the structuring process of the Chinese-Tibetan relationship, this project suggests that the bilateral relationship hovered somewhere at the intersection of suzerainty, sovereignty, political alliance, and diplomatic rivalry. A fixed definition is hard to pin down because this relationship contingently shifted from one mode to another. In this regard, taking up the perspective of the highland society allows for an illuminating exploration of how, when, and why the Chinese-Tibetan relationship changed and thus situates supposedly ahistorical political disputes in their historical context.

Current disagreements on sovereignty and mutually exclusive historical interpretations obscure the position of the highland society in relation to both China and Tibet. Following an ontological turn to excavate the livelihood, logic, and perspectives of the highland inhabitants, this project illuminates how contemporary disputes have taken shape and how historical actors dealt with political tension. In this regard, the borderland perspective has the potential to immunize academic projects that have been infected by political wrangles. By eschewing the predominant nation-state framework which silences those who inhabited the periphery, this project is a probing interrogation of what it means to have political subjectivity, to be able to access the state apparatus, and to have one's voice be heard in history.

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